THE SELKIE

ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME ONE

STORIES OF REBELLION

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THE SELKIE ANTHOLOGY

Volume I: Stories of Rebellion

The Selkie Publications CIC

Enterprise Hub

11 Crichton Street

EH8 9LE

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Published in 2024.

Design and typesetting by Zala Jambrovic Hatic

Cover illustration by Blake Doucet

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R. W. Thorne

NA MAC-TÌRE

Who possesses this landscape?—

The man who bought it or

I who am possessed by it?

—Norman MacCaig, ‘A Man in Assynt’

Chan urrainn do dhuine ‘sambith seirbhis a dhéanamh do dhà mhaighstir.

(No one can serve two masters.)

—Gàidhlig proverb

They cleared my folk in 1853. Set fire to roofs; tore buildings apart. The factor’s men came with warrants my children could not read, printed on papers foreign to my soil.

On boats at Eilean Iarmain, they forced them: men, women, children, families. Humans snarling and biting like wolves. Petitions were put up – oh aye, they had their petitions! But we know the tale of tongues: one word is no better than the other, only the blade that backs it. The folk of Cnòideart raised their petitions in 1853, and all the same, the government’s ship came and took them to the colonies that autumn as the factor’s men ripped open their homes.

They said no words as they boarded. What could be said to the barrel of a gun? Aye, they only wept, and I with them.

I speak no words for these reasons: they are impossible for one to negotiate with. My tongue is not the Gàidhlig, nor the Scots, nor the English, though you might hear all three from my kin, a human translation of what is eternal. Before the English were the Scots, and before them, the Gaels and the Vikings and the Britons, and so on. I speak no language but the rockslide, the treefall, the waves’ long and steady snore. And aye, my folk speak many languages, but they are not my own.

No humans came to replace those who had been forced to leave. Their homes lay burnt: black spots on my skin, their harvests unreaped. The tattie plants and corn went up in great blooms, only to rot come winter.

The new chief, An Dòmhnaill, was too young a lad to know me. *Me* who they say he lorded over. In truth, he only lorded over the humans. But it was his widowed mother, aye, and a pack of ‘trustees’ far from us in Edinburgh, who called for the clearing. They left only a few untouched, those whose roots through my soil went back some millennia. A blink in the *beinn*’s eye – true – but whole lifetimes, distant worlds, for the clansmen.

Two years later the Dòmhnaills wrote another set of words, saying they had me sold to a southern industrialist by the name of Baird. He called himself Scottish – a Conservative too – but he could not speak the language of my children then, not the Gàidhlig. Nor could he conserve me, as they had toiled and loved me – only the profits he could rip from me in Cnòideart and from digging his fingers deep into Lanarkshire’s soil.

He forced more to go, aye, replaced them all with a factory of sheep: industrial shepherding. A dozen or so families remained, left to starve on the beach.

But Baird died twenty years later, far, far from my soil. And then t’were the Bowlbys for many years. By then, the burnt homes and their inhabitants were gone, though not forgotten. Their scars remained. The Gàidhlig words were few and far between; the weed of English was thick spread.

A thousand humans lived on me before Culloden – that wretched word that killed so many of them – yet by the years of the Bowlbys it was no more than a hundred.

But there was peace, for a time. Though still with the pain of their forebears, the clan that remained had me, and I, them. And we worked each other well, though there was less working than before.

The Bowlbys only came a few months a year to fish and hunt my other children. They treated their fellow humans well, though, and were well-liked in turn. Every autumn, they held cèilidhs on my hallowed ground, where eighty years before it was in autumn that government ship, the *Sillery* came, and the cleared wept, and one hundred years before that the men of Cnòideart marched south at the harvest-time, in rebellion for their prince, but the spring returned only ruin.

Alas for my kin, the Bowlbys could not stay. They had words too: words like ‘debt’ and ‘investment’. And they wrote on another piece of paper for me to be sold, and my folk with me, to a man by the name of Brocket.

Of course, his real name wasn’t Brocket. That was his father’s title that the folks down in London had given for his services to money-making. The Brockets were a family of millionaire brewers. They had papers from banks saying they owned the land in Hertfordshire, and Hampshire, and Maynooth, and aye, they were rich in the eyes of the banks.

Wee Brocket (or Arthur Nall-Cain, if you like), liked to call himself an Old Etonian, and an Oxford scholar, and a Tory Peer. Do you know the Gàidhlig for ‘Oxford’ or ‘Eton’? My children did not.

Arthur had a German word, a new one even for him: he called himself a Nazi, aye, and was friendly with the new leader over in Deutschland. He went to his birthday in Berlin in ’38 even, a guest of honour, and shook hands and shared his teapot. They drank and whored and did who knows what else, and still reeking of poison, Brocket took the boat back to England and then came straight for me and my folk.

Now, I stake no claim over my children. They are there to live and die as I cannot, and they change faster than the antlers on a deer’s head. I wash and dry their fates, true, but not with that intention. I am simply my deed and have always been so. Brocket’s coming was a human affair, not my own, but I would feel his footprint nonetheless.

You see, Brocket was not a man of the land, but a man sick in his own head. He had no knowledge of peat or crop or timber; only the numbers on his bank statement, the inbred pageantry of Eton, and the harsh words of the Führer. Brocket had no intention of keeping what little remained of a human age of toil.

And so – and aye, this be the word of my kinswoman, Annie MacDonald – so began a ‘second clearance’ when he arrived.

For with Brocket came his shooting parties and humans he spat were ‘important’ (one by the name of Chamberlain, I recall – he spoke much of that Chamberlain). And with them came eviction notices served left and right, mostly to the elderly who’d seen so much pain already: grandchildren of the cleared in ’53, veterans of the Great War, survivors of a dying race. Brocket cleared the lot of them and shot as many of my deer as were unfortunate to cross him. He put more and more invisible walls on my land and punished folks harshly for crossing them, saying I was his and he could lock me up as he willed. The fool couldn’t find a padlock big enough.

And it was his master, that Führer, who went and started another Great War (why humans call their bloodshed great, I shall never know).

But for his affections for the Nazi-word, Brocket fell out with Chamberlain and the man that followed, and all the London folk he’d cosseted the past ten years, too. The government took his mansion, An Dòmhnall, built upon me before his mother sold it off to Baird, and used it for their soldiers to train and quarter in. That put a sourness on Brocket’s face I’d not seen since Somerled.

Seven of those soldiers were my own kin. Their words for themselves were:

DUNCAN MACPHAIL. HENRY MACASKILL. ARCHIE MACDONALD. ARCHIE MACDOUGALL. JACK MACHARDY. SANDY MACPHEE. WILLIAM QUINNALL.

They trained on my soil for war, and as their forebears did two hundred years before, they left Cnòideart to fight for what they saw to be right – and they won. The great rebellion against the fascists, the Nazis, the Führer: aye, my boys won it well in Germany and lived to tell the tale.

But it was the Nazi at home my sons might’ve worried for, if the word of the government, aye, the government down in London, hadn’t been stamped on them and their kin for the past three hundred years. For while MacPhail and MacAskill and the rest fought for their lives far from their lovers and parents and children, Brocket’s eyes never left Cnòideart.

After the war, the government returned his big house, so he could do as he pleased. He was a Nazi, true, but he had the word of money, and that is all any government cares for, after a time. He commanded the servants in his house to take everything the soldiers had touched and tip it into Loch Nibheis: forks and knives and sheets and bed frames and the like.

Now, I’m no Sea Mither1, but I see no use for human cutlery in her depths. She may grind stones to sand for my shores in no time, a wondrous gift, aye, but forks, knives, and spoons? They make for such an ugly rust.

But Brocket did not care for her, nor I, nor the folk that remained. When my seven sons returned, they returned to find a master with no soul with which to master them. Brocket sent orders to carry on as before – to clear, and evict, and burn with his words.

And just as they had in ’53, my folk put out their petitions in 1948 – this time to the Secretary of State for Scotland, a man from Edinburgh by the name of Arthur Woodburn. Woodburn said he cared for the common man, oh aye, he called himself a Labour man, but what did he know of my folks’ labour? He was a clerk, a manager, a university lecturer, and who’d have been surprised that he and his government did nothing in the end? Aye, he sided with Brocket, the uncouth Nazi, as did his government in London.

*What was to be done?* thought MacPhail, oh my crafty MacPhail. He’d fought for six years far from home, for that same government now guarding Brocket. At the house of Father MacPherson, my children’s priest, he and his six brothers met – MacAskill, MacDonald, MacDougall, MacHardy, MacPhee, and Quinnall – in black rubber boots and wool fleeces and short backs-and-sides and shaved chins.

There was once, though not in Cnòideart, a kind of rebellion the folk called a land raid. My people were cleared in silence in ’53, but in other parts of the Highlands, a few decades on, a movement rose to fight the words sent from London. And these folk fought for many years, while mine prospered under the Bowlbys, in neglected parts like Col and Ratharsair, Bhatarsaigh and Cataibh. By the end of the First Great War, they were exhausted but had won a few sweeter sentences from London.

Brocket knew nothing of this, of course – he knew nothing of the folk he claimed to step his boot upon. MacPhail though – well, he was born to stories of land raids up and down the Gàidhealtachd. And that was what he proposed to his comrades in Father MacPherson’s sitting room, over tea and toast.

And so, on a cold, frosty morning in November 1948, those seven men of the land started their rebellion. Not with guns, or cannons, or bayonets, but with scythes, and spades, and whisky. The Seven Men of Knoydart, as the southern press called them, marched right over Brocket’s invisible walls at Kilchoan and Scottas and began their toil. No harvests were to be left to rot, as they had a century ago.

Brocket – well, you can imagine. He raged and he whimpered and stuck up his nose, and his wife did alike. When he saw me being touched, and toiled, and loved in a way so deep he could not fathom, aye, he raged. After only a day, he took off to London to get his friends in high places, and warrants, and guns.

While my seven lads toiled a mere tenth of a square mile of Brocket’s estate – barely a two-thousandth of my skin – he went to the Court of Session in Edinburgh and called on Lord Strachan. Now, Strachan’s mother was from Sutherland, aye, and would’ve seen the last clearances and land raids. But he was his father’s boy, a Lowlander, and a rich lawyer. So who would be surprised that Strachan sent his interdicts that very day?

When snivelling Brocket fled for his boat, passing my seven lads with their scythes, the press was already there and on the whole thing like gulls. He told them, aye, the flaming fool: ‘Knoydart is not suitable for many people, as there is too much rain.’ Trust a Sassenach.

Though Brocket was rid from my earth and my seven men got many telegrams and letters of support from across Scotland, well it was no time at all until Woodburn – you mind Woodburn? – arrived in a government boat in Loch Nibheis, aye, just as the *Sillery* came in ’53. And you know the rottenest thing? He telegrammed London to say he’d set foot in Cnòideart, but the truth is, the man never left his boat and watched us all with his binoculars like a voyeur.

But ach, I must scold my kin. They were young and had faith: faith that justice held beyond the heights of Brocket. They trusted lawyers to sort it out for them in the end, but you know what I’ve said about words already; the court in London ruled against them, and under the threat of prison, they were cleared from me as their ancestors had been before. Their one consolation: Brocket sold the estate soon after.

There is perhaps one redeeming thing about human words, I’d say, and it is that they have such a thing as rhyme. I too rhyme, you see. The Seven Men of Knoydart, aye, the southern journalists called them that, not by chance, but after seven men that came before: the Seven Men of *Moidart.*

Mùideart is a neighbour and a friend, though we keep to ourselves with a few lochs in between. And in 1745, the Italian prince landed on her shore at Ceann Loch Mùideart with seven disciples, all high-class men of Europe, and launched a rebellion from there. It was the greatest rebellion, they say, in the history of these isles, a rebellion that shaped the course of the human world, even. From the landing of those seven men in summer of ’45, to the events of Culloden in the cold spring that followed, aye, my people were there. They rose and fell like dragonflies.

And just two hundred years later, seven more came, this time of my own water and earth, to lead, not a new rebellion, but the same that has raged by me for millennia. They fought, and they lost, as their ancestors did for Charlie, but aye, did they fight. They were not high-class men like the Seven of Moidart, nor like Brocket, not aristocrats in the human sense. But by the stars, they were richer than any of that ilk who has walked my soil.

T’was a human killed the last wolf to walk my hills, seven hundred years ago. An arrow through her panicked skull: and she was a mother with cubs yet. But though the wolf was killed, she did not die.

For they fought like wolves in ’46, those men of Cnòideart shot dead in Culloden’s bog, and their widows howled like wolves afterward and snapped at the redcoats that’d come to claim them. And the songs on the ships that took their kin in 1853, aye, they sang like wolves to the wind.

And those seven men, those sons of the land, *na mac-tìre*: aye, they were my wolves too. Wolves who fought with teeth and bone for my teat, for our right to live together. Seventy years have passed since they snapped at Brocket and received their own arrow to the skull in the word of an English warrant, and they were the last wolves I have seen in that time.

Seventy years, aye. A long time for clansmen, to be true, but only a blinking of my eyes. And what will I see when they reopen, eh?

In 1997, the remaining one hundred and fifty-seven inhabitants of Cnòideart (Knoydart) participated in a community buyout that brought their land back into public ownership, two hundred and fifty years after the Jacobite rebellion that heralded the end of their traditional way of life. Though this was a great victory against the unjust grain of ‘progress’, their fight is not over, and countless threats to their way of life remain.

A cairn in the main village of Inbhir Aoidh (Inverie) commemorates the seven men that fought in 1948 ‘to secure a place to live and work’.

It reads: ‘For over a century Highlanders had been forced to use land raids to gain a foothold where their forebears lived. Their struggle should inspire each new generation of Scots to gain such rights by just laws.

‘History will judge harshly the oppressive laws that have led to the virtual extinction of a unique culture from this beautiful place.’

This land will judge them harsher.

NOTES

1The Sea Mither, in Orcadian folklore, is the goddess and personification of the sea during summer months (her wintry counterpart being Teran). Her mythological origins combine both Celtic and Norse traditions.

Sam Casey

MUTINY ON KERR LAKE

Now, my dear reader, before we begin I must have you know I have been on many ships before and never once had a mutinous thought. From my time in the Navy and my time on the lake, I’ve had water beneath my feet more often than land. Always, I faithfully discharged the orders of those appointed over me. But there are times, dear reader, where orders cannot be obeyed, for your allegiance must lie with the safety of the ship and your fellow shipmates. In those rare, turbulent moments, the just action is to disobey, for when an unjust captain acts with malicious intent, disregards all pleas of reason, and tyrannically steers the ship towards uncaring crags, he forfeits the position he holds, and the duty of all sailors lies with the hull beneath their feet.

It is on July 16th, in the sweltering heat of midsummer, that we begin. A town in rural Virginia held an annual event. Clarksville sits perched on Kerr Lake, and though it is no Walden Pond, many a poet and writer have breathed inspiration out of the sunset-stained skies, being lulled gently by the ever-present wake. Once a year, Lakefest acts like a beacon, attracting all boat-owning gentry, as well as their friends and families, from the adjacent lands to the tiny town. Hotels are booked, tents erected, and docks put to full use. The single street in the town becomes packed with looky-loos, the woods peopled with campers and squatters, and the sacred waters littered with pontoons, leaking aluminum-hull fishing vessels, and noisy cigarette speed boats.

The original inhabitants of the lake know better than to go into town, but no one can ignore the siren call of the water. In prior years, the Casey Clan would often rise early and sail to our beach before the invaders claimed it as their own. But alas, our trusty sailboat had land beneath its hull due to a crack that refused to hold water out. How she yearned to fill her sails and hear the laughter of her crew as she flew past fishers and speedsters! But until the repair was made, we were relegated to the ships of others. As once was the case when meats were traded for gold, a boating trip is traded for coolers of beer, a steadfast crew, and a promise to repay. Since over the years we had captained often, we had no trouble enlisting our services to a friend and neighbor in kind.

The log book tells of two key events from the fated trip. The first was that the crafty carpenter of five and twenty, the youngest of the crew, had gotten his hands on the mythical White Lightning. Oh, how a swig would breathe the breath of life into the palest of souls! A sip transports the sommelier of sin to the peak of the highest mountain, where the crisp air clears the mind of fog. And though the descent down Moonshine’s Mountain is long and treacherous, the view at the top is worth the hike. As the mason jar was passed around, morale and music arose.

The second event is apt to happen when life lingers too long on one song. The captain, in charge of the shanties, selected a song displeasing to the rest of the crew. When beseeched to change it, he refused until I looked at him and strongly urged him to comply with the wishes of the crew—an exhortation bordering on an order. He acquiesced, and thus, my gentle rebuke for the good of the ship set in motion the cataclysmic events to follow.

After the immediate tension was resolved, the crew relaxed to watch Apollo continue his steadfast descent as night settled slowly around the *Stargazer* and her voyeuristic voyagers.

With the sun setting in the west, the Lakefest fireworks were set up due east. The captain ordered the engines “all ahead full” and aimed the bow toward the colored lights. Although most untrained sailors skip the sunset and squat below the bridge awaiting the evening’s keynote event, the *Stargazer* was far from alone in making her hasty trek. Like mosquitos flying full speed to the blue light of death, speeding ships of every size swarmed toward their densely packed demise. Nose to nose, jostled in the ever-present wake, fated captains inched closer to the siren sight. Our captain, restraining crew and self alike, remained on the outskirts of the sea of ships, keeping the *Stargazer* isolated from the pack.

As the ship slowed to simulate the stillness of the starry night, the crew gazed in wonder through their eyes, lenses, and screens at the plethora of fleeting fire. The crescendo of colorful lights across the lake came to a climax before disappearing into the blackened night. The combustion of charges and diesel alike revived the engines of ships and the race to safe harbor began.

The *Stargazer,* being well positioned, took the lead with a deckhand on the bow to act as lookout. Your faithful first mate kept watch off the stern, eying the encroaching metallic fleet. It would be close, but our starting position and quick escape would allow us to reach our home port safely.

At precisely 2048, the deafening *forte* of the turning submerged propeller went *subito sotto*. Alarmed and ready for quick repairs, I turned to catch the captain’s captured gaze. As children name cherished toys after cherished joys, the captain had christenedthe *Stargazer* after his true passion and now had stopped the ship in the middle of the lake to enjoy it. Varied entreaties did nothing to turn the captain’s gaze toward the approaching combatants. The pleading of the captive crew vainly fell on power-drunk, stalwart ears. With the ships now no more than a mile off, I knew I must act.

Removing a captain from his treasured throne is no easy act, and the lack of moon and moonshine made the act harder. Rising to full height and authority, I stood next to the captain’s chair and, looking down at him, ordered him to move. My word left no chance for rebuttal, yet his lips opened in an attempt. A tilt of my head caused his lips to still and his body to vacate the space of control. The engine roared as the man sank shriveled into the stern’s stool.

The treacherous trip concluded with uneventful docking and trekking up the hill toward waiting beds. The uneasy company marched, war weary, like foot soldiers and prisoners, destination desired to conclude the story, but unable to relieve the guilt of the necessary acts in an unnecessary conflict. Looking back, I saw the story’s seamstress gently buffeted beneath a sky of stars.

James J. Siegel

DEATH OF A DIVA

When Judy Garland died, the gays had finally had enough

or so the mythology goes, the apocryphal

gospel of queer liberation.

I do not know if it is true, but I have loved many women

who loved me in return with songs and if we lost another queen today

I do not believe we could let her go

quietly.

Listen to Judy at Carnegie Hall and her voice is an emerald skyline,

the Kansas monochrome of our life evaporates.

And when she sings “San Francisco”

there is no doubt we are *coming home again,*

never to roam again.

It is all any of us want,

golden gates and a golden west,

a home to call our own.

But what are we doing now that they’re calling us *groomers* again,

the Nazis armed and marching again,

the country confusing its bibles for bullets again?

When I was young I locked my bedroom door

and spent the days with nothing

but the radio, worshiping a goddess breathing

in the grooves of a record like she was breathing for me.

I memorized all those dance steps, memorized

the words of every diva who picked me up

and lifted me out of Ohio, out of the oppressive

summers writing lyrics longhand until I knew the verses

forwards and backwards.

But goddamn, I’m so tired

of going backwards, listening to the same

old hymns, fighting

the same fights we fought years before.

I’ve had my Judys

and I’m positive you’ve had some, too.

A songstress who saved you, but tell me

what you are willing to do to save yourself

when the chorus of the past blends into the present,

the temperature of our discourse

rising and bubbling over like June 27, 1969,

our mother, our idol

in a casket of yellow roses.

Remember, the Manhattan streets

were humid and crowded, ninety-five degrees,

20,000 people shoulder to shoulder

waiting to say goodbye to our lady of the contralto

and all they got in return

was another mafia-owned bar,

more watered-down drinks, another police raid

when all they wanted was to dance,

and sing,

and live,

and exist.

It’s all coming back around again,

and I know you feel it, too.

The death of another diva that will lead to the coda,

the opening strings of a new song.

The congregation will return; they always do.

The cops, and politicians too,

and you will know what to do

when they try to close your bar again,

when they line you against the wall

demanding proof of who you are.          Remember

every song gifted by the feminine.

Remember the rhapsody in uprooting a parking meter,

the symphony in pitching pennies, beer bottles

smashed through windows, the sides of police cars.

Remember, even a brick can sing

when it’s heaved high and strums against the sky.

And the falling notes that land and shatter

the glass jaws of injustice will be music,

all the music you’ll need.

A. W. Earl

THIS POEM IS ABOUT DISEASE, NOT BIGOTRY

1. suspected/infected

However much they care about

mad women in the attic,

they always take the side of sainted Jane.

I feel dog-bitten, in denial.

I’ve sluiced every wound that I could see,

injected bruising knowledge of myself,

and ridden out the fever which that brings.

Still,

there are places in my mind I cannot go.

I do not know I could come safely home.

The illness is zoonotic. There is no cure.

It takes a certain kind of brain to look

headlong at evidence and believe

the opposite is true.

When I tell you the vaccine’s going to hurt,

you say that you would rather choose to die.

Well.

Rapidly progressive and acute,

it spreads through fast axonal transport,

laying waste,

without immediate symptoms.

Keep eyes on intersecting power

or else it slips its hold into you

like teeth.

2. cure/symptomatic/diagnosis

I wonder, sometimes,

how it was that *I* survived.

Blind luck.

You don’t know sickness ’til

a coma is your only chance,

nor madness ’til someone calmly,

kindly, robs you of your rights.

In the case of *Bell v. Tavistock*, a woman

who had been a man slipped

a knife into my teenage self and

pulled.

The early symptoms are nausea,

diarrhoea, a sensitivity to light,

headache, cough,

widespread musculoskeletal pain.

So many other things it could be,

or ways you could stay with us,

but even now inoculation is of little use.

Young, previously healthy candidates

have the best chance with aggressive therapies.

In most cases,

even the Milwaukee protocol will fail.

Next comes itching, paraesthesias, pain.

By this point

any obvious wound has healed.

It is most commonly misdiagnosed

as some issue of mental health.

3. rage/calm/survival

How silently can you make a person scream?

In furious rabies, it is thought

the main site of sickness is the brain.

Where does fury end and sickness start?

Any animal would fight for its own life.

If you take its hands, its words, its kicking feet

are you going to act surprised that it will bite?

For my part,

I’d burn that bitch in her bed,

gut Rochester,

set the whole damn place ablaze.

I’m not averse to red upon my hands

and when the world is this mad-making, it

is cruelty to be sane.

If rabies is suspected, the animal is killed.

And why is anger infection’s proof?

I do not salivate, I *spit*,

but all the same

there are hands keen to catch me if I fall,

a needle all filled up for my own good.

This is not a cure. I do not trust

their wet mouths, the blankness in their eyes.

When all the world is sick, is it madness to be well?

If rabies is suspected, the animal is killed.

Here’s a better tell:

never trust a wild thing acting tame.

Encephalitic rabies is characterised

by apathy, headaches, delirium.

The virus travels from the brain to other parts –

there are seizures, salivation.

The most common vector of infection

is the bite.

We’ve all got teeth, love,

I’ve seen yours well enough.

It can infect the eyes, the skin,

the gastrointestinal tract.

Do you know it can even infect the heart?

So tell me then, the difference between healthy flesh

fighting to live and animal become disease?

You’ll find it in this torturing, this starving out,

in this fear of water which could prevent spread.

This is sickness made self-righteous,

virus as puppet master, breaking

every shred of bond you said we shared.

If rabies is suspected, the animal is killed –

but some of us have no gauntlets and no gun,

some are all ache from vaccines and blood loss.

God knows we’re tired of it by now –

the illness dragging on in you, the hate

that knows no family, no kindness, and no love,

the infection that would gladly claim us too.

Eventually, it progresses: paralysis,

coma, death.

Docility.

That’s the killer’s final tool.

Your back limbs collapsed, a drool

that can become a scream at slightest touch.

There’s nothing of you left,

just sickness

serving something that would kill us both.

Say what you want, my legs are strong,

and they hold me here, at Bertha’s side,

a cleansing wave of flame across the sky.

Some houses just deserve to burn.

Charlotte Newbury

THIS IS A PARABLE

It is the parable of Saint Agnes,

whose body grew hair to keep the rapists away,

and who was murdered anyway, cocooned, half wolf,

sainted. It is the parable of women, not marble icons,

but made of bone and guts beneath their flesh. Burn us

and turn us to chalk, the blinding white of sea foam

and starlight.

S. R. Vidmar

SNAKEBITE

They came for us in the early hours of the morning, crashing through the doors and hurling curses at us. *Vermin*, they spat. *Devil’s spawn*.

The memory of that murky sky still lingered, etched in my mind from the day they took my sister. Aster had fought back, struggling to bite their arms. I could see the fear in her eyes – blue, or were they grey? – as they pulled back her short brown hair, fitting a muzzle over her. Yet, defiance burned within her as she tried to shake them off while they dragged her behind them like a captured dog. Devnah stood there, watching it all unfold, as if oblivious to the power our saliva held – the power he had disclosed.

He had wept in my arms, tears streaming from his green eyes as the pain in his left leg intensified. In that vulnerable moment, I tried to help him. Not because my tribe was known as the true healers. No, I sought to cure him because I believed we were destined to build something wonderful together.

And in doing so, I had condemned my only sister.

*Foolish heart.*

I blinked back the fog, and the memories retreated into their broken shells. Rage was pulsing in the corners of my eyes, but I swallowed it down with newly formed venom.

The sun was rising from the deepest parts of the ocean, colouring the skyline in soft bluish hues. Walking back to camp, I wondered about Aster’s eyes, sickened by the fact that I couldn’t remember their colour, yet the exact hue of Devnah’s lingered vividly in my memory.

I smiled ruefully and wondered how tall Aster was now, at sixteen. Back then, she had helped me cure Devnah and I had willingly offered him our most sacred truth. ‘Her glands are still developing and her saliva is not fully poisonous yet. Extracted properly, the venom turns into medicine.’

I didn’t know whom I hated more, Devnah or myself.

Once back in the camp, I saw my people discussing today’s preparations. No one had slept the night before, all too eager to finally free our loved ones, and the festivities had lasted well into the short night. As the descendants of the goddess Angitia, we were immune to any poison, even the sweetest kind, so no one was particularly worried about drinking too much ale.

Looking around, I spotted Panas leaning over a map near a small group of tents that belonged to me and my inner circle. Panas was one of my closest friends, and she had known intimately what Aster’s disappearance had done to me. While I had suffered the loss of my sister, she had tried to bear the loss of her younger brother, Lev. Panas was sitting by the small sputtering fire, the light just enough for her to see the map. I angled closer and saw her scarred fingers following the trace of the Sava, the river that would bring us salvation. Before I could say anything, the waking horn blared to arouse those who had succumbed to sleep despite the adrenaline pumping in their veins. The rustling around the camp became even louder.

In less than an hour, we would set sail into the city our enemy had driven us from. In less than a day, we would reclaim Graanerdam, and I would finally stand in front of the one who had betrayed us. Betrayed *me.*

And after, I could finally beg Aster for forgiveness.

I sat down beside Panas on the long log draped with wool.

‘There’s no place for us to escape,’ she said, not looking up from the flat rendition of our country. I knew what she was saying. It would be an all-out war – just like we wanted. But a needling worry was making me restless. I couldn’t give up rescuing Aster and the other young ones, but was marching into a trap worth the lives of my remaining people? Was I condemning us all?

As if sensing my darkening mood, Panas rolled up the map. ‘You should get ready, Commander.’

Her steely voice grounded me. Breathing out, I stood up and walked to my tent, thinking about our journey. The most effective attack was our venom, but it wouldn’t hurt to bring along some axes and swords.

Smiling, I entered my tent and reached for my spaulders. The ritual of donning my armour centred me, channelling my thoughts into a single goal – avenging and rescuing my people. I slung the bow and quiver across my back and weighed the axe in my hand before fastening it to my hip.

A low murmur reached me from the outside, making my heart dance in anticipation. The moment of reckoning was near and I could not wait to pierce *his* heart with a poisoned arrow. Like hisbetrayal had done to me that night so many moons ago.

Walking out, I noticed Panas and a few other soldiers waiting for me. My step faltered as I took in their silent bearing, and my previous excitement made way for newly found anxiety. They were not just soldiers; they were my friends. My left hand rested on my axe as I breathed in a few times.

Despite being the tallest among them, I forced myself to look every one of them in the eye. Today’s plans had been churning in our minds since the moment our enemy started barging into our homes and pulling our younger siblings away, locking them up, never to be seen again. Five years ago we all swore to bring our enemy – *Devnah* – to his knees.

The features of my soldiers were inscrutable aside from a firm resolution shining in their eyes, mirroring my own. A chuckle of relief escaped from my mouth and the crisp fresh air sharpened my mind even as my heart thumped in my chest, excited for the retribution that awaited.

‘Let’s go.’ I nodded at them.

I turned towards the thicket that led down to a larger clearing where the Sava was wide enough for our people to board the ships. My inner circle followed behind me and started to give orders to their subordinates.

‘Arlynn, this one’s yours.’ Panas jerked her head towards the biggest warship. It was long enough to accommodate a felled adult oak tree and wide enough to float comfortably on even the rockiest waters. The hull was painted in light blue and grey to make it look similar to the surrounding water, while the deck was green and brown – the colours of our tribe. A white-and-green flag was mounted atop the main topmast, the black profile of a snake opening its jaw as if readying for a bite. It fluttered in the wind, warning us not to let the prey get away.

Once on the upper deck, I turned around, witnessing for the first time in many years Angitia’s fleet restored to its former magnificence. Before our roles as healers, we were warriors, and we bided our time like a snake in stasis – we digested our pains and closed our rage deep into our hearts.

Locking eyes with Panas on a smaller warship on the other side, I gave her the signal. The tranquil air was pierced by the blaring of horns and the thumping of drums. The roar of the soldiers drowned out my anxiety and doubts. Ahead, several of our smaller boats made way for the warships as we slowly sailed towards Graanerdam.

The bluish sun gradually made its trek from one side of the sky to the other. The only noises were the murmurs and occasional laughter among the soldiers. The river was starting to get wider and we would soon be entering the first watergate. Five canals in total served to regulate the flow of water into the city. When the rainy season came, all five canals would be permanently closed to prevent Graanerdam from getting flooded. By that time, the capital would be well ours.

My fingers itched to grab the axe cinched at my hip when the first watergate came in sight. The air crackled with the cheers of my soldiers, and the screams of getting in position resounded throughout our fleet. At the next moment, we passed through the enormous gate, and I could almost taste the tension rolling off of my soldiers. Searching the surroundings for any movement, all I could discern was our fleet slowly drifting through the deserted territory. It was then that the realisation hit me.

We were sailing into the heart of the city, exactly where the enemy wanted us. The once lively chatter among my soldiers dwindled into an uneasy quiet as if sensing something was amiss.

I glanced towards Panas, noticing her wide stance and hands resting on the two swords. She seemed as tense as I was feeling, the same unrest that sparked my own heart into beating faster. Would she resent or approve of my decision?

‘Keep moving!’ I yelled, suppressing the urge to turn back. I couldn’t afford to lose my nerve now, not when Aster might be somewhere behind those imposing walls.

Ignoring the coiling tension in my stomach, I focused on the deceptively calm surroundings that persisted through the remaining watergates.

Now, only one gate separated us from Graanerdam. When the front of our fleet reached the final watergate, an eerie silence hung over the enemy’s line. The word about our incoming fleet should have already been spreading like wildfire, but instead of screams and cries, the only noise was from the portcullis steadily pulling up. My teeth ground together in tension.

Our watercraft glided into the city, floating on the canal, and an unsettling quiet enveloped us. My soldiers remained vigilant, their eyes trained on the silent city.

And then it happened.

Once our ships were inside, the gate closed, trapping us. The first screams penetrated the still air, but they weren’t coming from the city. The enemy’s blazing arrows rained down on us, each loud cry accompanying my people falling, leaving a red trail in the murky water.

My throat dried up around the orders I wanted to shout. The smaller boats sank one by one, consumed by fire, smothering the cries of their sailors.

Tension locked my muscles and I couldn’t seem to catch my breath. Smoke filled my nose and unwanted memories barged to the forefront. *Devnah* standing behind the hooded figures while they muzzled Aster. *Devnah* leading the shrouded figures away after being called *my liege*. The hollow pain that followed his retreating back suddenly became very real.

I gasped and looked down, realising the pain was coming from an arrow piercing my thigh. I closed my eyes briefly, thanking the goddess for this searing reminder.

My eyes darted around as I snapped off the arrow, trying to see where the enemies were hidden. While they could see us, we were blind in this fight.

I looked down at the arrow tail in my hand. The entire shaft was covered in a dark shade. Like it had been dipped in something red before firing. A haunting familiarity accompanied the scent, one I hadn’t encountered in years.

I stilled.

He wouldn’t.

I clutched my chest as I gasped for breath.

Not like this.

My heart was throbbing, only one thought consuming my mind. *That was Aster’s blood.*

The realisation almost made me vomit and my vision swam.

My heart mourned but the despair building in my chest soon gave way to blinding rage as I unfastened my bow. Devnah was a dead man walking.

I bellowed orders as my people scrambled to load the cannons roped onto the decks of the warships. Gritting my teeth, I felt the venomous liquid trickling down my fangs, ready to be plunged into the enemy’s skin. Scanning the chaos, my eyes locked onto a lone figure standing on the balcony of the castle he ruled – the one who had not only shattered my heart but now aimed at killing my very soul.

And the one who would see my face as the last thing before being sent to the underworld.

‘*Devnah*!’ I screamed until my lungs hurt. Nocking an arrow, I willed my hands to still, ignoring the pain in my thigh. On the next exhale I let my arrow loose. I craved his pain, but the guards beside him intervened before it could happen. Devnah met my gaze, and I felt my blood boil. I wanted to see the fear on his face instead of the smug smile he wore. To *taste* his blood while I bit into his treacherous skin.

But for that, I needed to get closer to him.

I turned to look for Panas, who was giving orders for the next round of cannon fire. I called her name, and when she saw my expression, understanding dawned on her face. The only thing she asked was, ‘Where?’

I pointed towards the balcony and took a running start before leaping from the ship to the canal bank. Discarding the bow, I gripped my axe, its weight grounding me. The pain in my thigh was worsening, but I tried to will it away.

In the next second, a deafening noise erupted from somewhere high up. The balcony exploded in a cloud of smoke, and screaming figures fell with the rubble. Stalking towards the debris, I noticed the red and blue remnants that were once probably part of the king’s coat.

A rustle of fabric served as the only warning before a sword clashed against my axe. Devnah’s face was scrunched up with effort, but he didn’t give in. Even though he had never been the best politician, he had been one of the strongest knights before damaging his leg. Before my younger self willingly offered him Aster’s venom and showed him how to make a potent medicine.

Before I unknowingly helped him to become a king who led search parties for my people.

The venom pooled in my mouth.

I pushed back against him, enough to make him stumble. Devnah huffed before striking again. And so we battled.

After some time we were both exhausted. Many more corpses were scattered around, yet the shouting persisted. The wound in my thigh pulsed, my legs ached from the effort, and the cuts Devnah’s sword left behind, while not deep, still bled.

‘Why couldn’t you just stay hidden?’

I looked up. Devnah was breathing hard, red dripping down his forearm where I’d struck him with my edge. He was frustrated.

‘Why, so that you could keep me in check? I know you killed Aster!’ I screamed, gripping my axe tighter despite the slickness from sweat and blood.

In place of a snicker, his face revealed anguish, his green eyes filled with regret. Iwanted to *burn* those eyes out.

‘I tried to *protect* you!’

A bitter laugh escaped me. ‘How? With hunting dogs sent to rip us apart?’

The sudden nausea almost made me lose my step as the images of my people’s missing limbs and deformed faces flashed before my eyes. I didn’t know how I hadn’t seen it sooner, how we were all just pawns in his twisted game, excuses he used to gain power.

But no more. It was time to finish this.

I was close enough now that I could smell Devnah’s sweat. His *fear*.

‘I only wanted you to become something more. Like we talked about!’ His pitiful voice only deepened the bitter shame of believing his words. The dream he had laid out before, of us living together – of making me his *consort* – now tasted like rancid meat.

‘I *swear* I didn’t know they would do anything to Aster!’

Familiar grief and rage enveloped me like dear friends, pushing me forward. I roared and lunged towards him, my jaw already opening. His eyes widened as I discarded the axe and gripped him by the neck, plunging my incisors into his soft skin.

We tumbled and he bucked in my grip. It would have been so *good* to rip his throat apart, but he didn’t deserve a swift ending – I *needed* him to die painfully and slowly.

I moved my head away and looked directly into his wide eyes.

‘A-arlynn—’ He struggled to breathe, but the venom had already taken control of his lungs. I spat on his face. Nothing could exonerate the atrocious deeds he and his fraudulent healers had committed towards our kind – towards Aster. But his death would need to be consolation enough.

A victorious cry pierced the sky as I stood up. Panas limped towards me, the naked relief stark against her bloody face. She nodded.

I blinked back tears that threatened to slip out, and I closed my eyes.

We would search the city but I knew Aster was gone. And probably, along with her, all the other young ones who had endured so much for a future they would never see.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and locked eyes with Panas. She wore a solemn expression, as if she, too, knew that Lev would not be found alive. As we reclaimed the city, the weight of the victory sank in, and I couldn’t help but wonder: at what price?

My chest hurt.

‘Let’s go,’ Panas’s words filtered through the fog in my head and I nodded.

It was painful, but like a snake shedding its skin in search of a better future, we would press on.

Olga Dermott-Bond

A LABOURER LISTENS TO JOSEPH ARCH OUTSIDE THE STAG’S HEAD PUB, 7TH FEBRUARY 1872

When he was a boy he had listened

to the Gospel, the feeding of the five

thousand. Instead of praying, he

had tried to imagine such a river of bodies,

wide as seething water, deep

as the sea. Tonight, despite spindling rain,

he thinks he might have found another

Bethesda: standing in this stream now,

he waits for a different miracle. He can’t see

or hear the sinful preacher from where he stands –

it doesn’t matter. The man under the tree

is an unlikely messiah, draped in black,

a crow-scarer. His words will ripple like

fish to feed him, through mouths of other

men. Joseph doesn’t walk on water but brings

promise of something better. He toiled

miles to hear this man, set off when

morning was a tight dark fist, the ache

in his bones a far-off distance he knew

he would meet later on. Night is anvil-black

but the sulphur-lit crowd looms, having

spilled from farms and common land, swaying

and swelling to this mighty ocean. The speech

beats the air and the bare branches bend back,

translating small drops to weighted iron.

He feels change coming, as if the world

could belong to men like him, like they belong

to early mornings and hard soil and the scythe.

Men do not need to be carrion, stripped

of their land. The meek will inherit the earth.

Joseph Arch (10 November 1826–12 February 1919) was a founding figure of the trade unionist movement. An unlikely leader, he drew attention to the conditions and welfare of the agricultural workers in Warwickshire. On the night of 7th February at the Stag’s Head pub he was expecting fewer than thirty people. Over two thousand people turned out to hear him speak.

Zack Wilkins

THE STARS BEFORE THEY FALL

It was the summer after they tore down the drive-in cinema and put up a supermarket when our parents started working from home and forgot they loved each other. The summer we finger-painted a mural on the cedar fence between our yards, adopted a neighborhood crow, and fed it french fries from the back porch until it became complacent. It was the summer we found a telescope half-buried in the cornfield.

“We can fix it!” Ruth said. “Lucy, please?”

When our neat nails were full of muck and the soil was black clumps and worms around us, we dug it loose: an old contraption of brass and broken glass. A telescope.

“Uncle Pete has a storage shed,” I said.

“Not fair! You hate astronomy. I should take it. I found it first.”

We settled. From Pete’s toolshed, I stole tarps, tape, chemical cleaner. We dragged the telescope to the forest. In a sheltered thicket, we made a tent: our escape.

We brushed dirt from dresses, traced mosquito bites with our fingertips, laughed because our parents would never approve, and made promises we could never keep.

At night, I greased bedroom windows, tied shirts around my shoes to muffle footsteps, tiptoed between sticks in the yard. I watched windows for light bulbs until I remembered to breathe. The routine was almost cathartic.

A week passed with steady progress. At night, I held a brown paper bag. Inside, a screwdriver, colored paper, hair ties, and chocolate truffles I had stolen every day from the cupboard. Auntie would never approve.

“To love another woman is sin,” she had said. “And no sinners go to heaven.”

The *eau de parfum* smelled of rose hips mixed with the harsh twang of fertilizer. I waited. Moonlight danced silver on the treetops. Footsteps. Our embrace was short, simple.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t show,” I said.

Ruth only stared at the stars. There was a weight on her mind that I wanted to lift, but she wouldn’t open for me. I tried to ask what the matter was, but she ignored me. I tried to twine my fingers with hers, but she pushed me away.

“Not tonight,” Ruth said. Her voice was barely a whisper. “What would it be, to touch the stars?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean . . . when we die, can we touch them? My pa says the angels in heaven get to touch the stars, and every star is an angel waiting to fall. What do you think?”

“I think that sounds about right.”

It was that night Ruth started coughing blood. We were bent over the telescope, cleaning dirt from the lens, sorting piles of broken glass. It happened suddenly: the rosy fluid stained her palms, smelled of coppery bile.

“Is it serious?” I asked.

It was.

The next day, Ruth was absent from school. I sat alone at the lunch table, spinning tops. The other children laughed at the purple dye in my hair. “Look at her,” one boy said. “Squatting like a sinner. Open-legs Lucy.” His name was Toby, and he knew how to kill doves by throwing stones.

“Where’s your Barbie friend?”

“Sick at home; couldn’t stand the smell of her.”

“Where’s Tomboy Ruth?”

“Off eating the devil, surely.”

“Mother never loved her.”

“Stop it!” I shouted loud enough for the rest of the cafeteria to hear. The boys grinned like wolves, then lined up one by one to go outside, victorious.

“Won’t let the boys near her,” Toby said. “Are you too good for us, Lucy?”

Two more weeks. Then I would be free, on summer vacation. Two more weeks.

At home, Auntie screamed at the walls. Mine were bare; Auntie had torn down runway model posters and instructed me to hang something important. I hoped that one day I would have something worthy of the word.

Auntie ranted about bills, the price-per-pound of hogs, the broken muffler on Uncle Pete’s rust bucket, and me.

“No wonder her mother couldn’t keep her,” Auntie said.

Uncle Pete sipped brandy until his words slurred. He always did this when Auntie ranted. It was his way of fighting back. When the brandy made him weak, he stumbled asleep, and I wondered if it was my fault.

At school, sitting in the classroom, the emptiness of Ruth’s desk matched the pit of my stomach.

“Lucy, are you feeling okay?” the teacher asked.

Boys snickered. I ran to the bathroom and didn’t make it. In the nurse’s office, I made awkward calls to Auntie and scrubbed vomit stains from my hand-knit sweater.

“What devil has gotten into you?” Auntie said.

At night, I tossed pebbles at Ruth’s bedroom window. Her house was cold, dark, silent. The telescope was forgotten. It didn’t matter anymore. Maybe it never mattered. Maybe the only thing that mattered was the pebbles plinking against glass and the fact that Ruth might hate me.

The curtains opened. Ruth stood weakly, a bandanna wrapped around her head. A desk lamp illuminated her silhouette, and, in that moment, she looked like an angel.

“Go away,” Ruth hissed.

“I won’t.”

“I can’t see you anymore.”

“I’m not leaving!”

I said it loud enough that the neighbor dog stirred and barked once: a clear, gruff note that pierced the silence of the night. Ruth panicked. Eyes wide, she tried to shush me. I wasn’t leaving. I climbed to the windowsill, hoisted myself over, and toppled into her room.

It was nothing like I expected. It was spartan. The bedsheets were flat and uncomfortable, a bit ragged. Her desk was an old sheet of plywood nailed to a sawhorse. The chair was recycled. A bible rested by her bed, the pages curled from overuse.

On her desk was a notebook, flat white pages. A diary. On the open page, an inked portrait of an astronaut, helmet off, hair flowing luxuriously in neat curlicues that stretched the page, the name *Lucy* printed in red ink.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Are you angry? Did I do something?"

She embraced me, shivering at my touch.

“Tell me,” I said.

Rockets have stages. The engines break apart, and once the first stage drops there is no turning back. The rocket must enter heaven or be damned. That’s how she described it. Stage four was the last stop before heaven.

“Doctor said it was the fertilizer,” Ruth explained. “Stays in the lungs where it shouldn’t.”

She removed the bandanna to reveal her hair, or lack thereof: golden locks falling in clumps.

“It’s not fair!” she said. “This only happens to old people, sick people. Why does it have to be like this? Why me?”

She grabbed her hair and pulled and pulled, clumps torn away like a shedding dog. There was almost nothing left. I didn’t try to stop her, I just stared, wondering what to say or not say, unsure whether to cry or run or punch the walls.

“Look at me,” she said. “I’m hideous.”

But there was one thing I was absolutely sure of as I drew close, kissed her forehead, wiped greasy fingers across her shirt.

“You’re still the most beautiful girl in the world.”

Things changed after that night. There was hardly any time before Ruth’s operation. I skipped school, rummaged through junkyards for cut glass, stole bottles of brass polish and glass cleaner. I tied my hair back one night and took a kitchen knife to the bun, cutting it all off.

“I’m like you, see?” I told Ruth. “We’ll do this together. We’ll beat this together. Stop the rockets. Fix the telescope. See? Everything is going to be okay. We’ll watch the stars before they fall.”

People noticed. My teacher called my aunt and uncle and said I was going through a phase. At church, Auntie made me confess. *Father, forgive me for I have lied, stolen, dreamed, and loved*.

Things came to a head when, one night, I stayed by the edge of the cornfields for not-quite-enough time to notice the light in Uncle Pete’s window. I ran to the forest. Pete followed. I was tending to the telescope, struggling to set the mirror back in place, oblivious, when he—

“Be more quiet,” he said. “Your aunt’ll hear ya sneaking out. You thought I wouldn’t notice? You thought you could get away with it?”

He approached me with a burlap bag clutched tightly in his meaty fists. There was a strange look in his eye, but not of discipline like I expected. Instead, Pete removed a delicate wooden box.

“I had a friend make it for me. Should fit the brass.” Nestled inside was a large lens, the approximate shape and form to fit the telescope. “I know we don’t see eye to eye. But I heard what happened. Ruth’s cancer. It’s not hard to put two and two together.”

I swallowed hard. What could I possibly say?

“I know how I can get sometimes.” With that, he reached gingerly, took my hand, and stared me square in the eyes. In the bright moonlight, his eyes were wet with tears.

“Everybody’s looking for that something, that reason to keep fightin’. A drink, a paycheck, a kiss. Your mama fought for you, till the last, even though you don’t remember. She fought. I’m proud of you, Lucy, you know that? You’re doing a good thing.”

 I nodded and whispered that I loved him. It was enough. For Pete, it had always been enough.

“Just don’t tell Auntie,” he said. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

The next evening, I helped Ruth walk through the cornfields. She was so weak, but I pulled her along, half dragging, half carrying. The telescope was almost ready.

The lens aligned. With fervent hands, we bolted brass, assembled spindly arms, and set our eyes on the clear sky. We looked at the stars. We found Orion’s Belt, the rings of Saturn, the bright glow of Venus ascending. Then laughing, on stolen blankets, we kissed until our mouths were sore and we forgot how to breathe.

“Surgery tomorrow,” Ruth said. “Doctor said there’s a chance to remove it. But I think . . . I think that even if they don’t, I’ll be okay, you know? Like the angels in heaven are waiting for me. Like I can touch the stars.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Thank you for tonight.”

Then Ruth passed me her notebook, with all the stars, the drawings, all her memories written in pictures of astronauts and curlicues. Her soul in drawings, pure and unblemished.

“I’m not keeping it,” I said.

“Hold on to it, okay?”

“I’m giving this back once you get back home. Once you’re better.”

She just smiled.

The next day, at school, I punched Toby in the mouth. He fell back, lips split and bloodied, eyes wide in shock. The other boys stopped and stared, too surprised to intervene, quiet while I wailed on him.

“I love Ruth!” I told him. Then I kicked his shin so hard it bled. “Screw you, Toby!”

I didn’t care that they put me in detention. It was my last day anyway. I waited for the bus to arrive and then, at home, waited anxiously for her.

I waited. I prayed. Pete set dinner by the door. I kept waiting, biting nails, bloodying thumbs, drawing hearts in my notebook until the pages leaked ink and stained my palms. When the soft knock finally arrived, I was too afraid to respond. Maybe because I guessed what had happened, and maybe because I didn’t want to know.

It was the summer we learned the difference between Ursa Major and Ursa Minor and how to politely answer awkward questions. When we stole brandy bottles and sipped slowly, traced the silhouettes of our bodies, tasted lips. When we fixed a telescope because it was the only piece of our lives we could fix.

Ruth moved away after her recovery. Her family talked about the climate and the people and the environment, and I wondered if any of it was my fault.

Sometimes, you give a piece of yourself away and the scar it leaves behind can never fully heal. I told her that once, in a café; we each drove a hundred miles to meet later in life. She had married, met a woman with eyes like mine, and I felt all at once jealous and proud. She just smiled, and the silence in her eyes spoke of what might have been, lost but not forgotten.

I’ll always remember the summer I hung Ruth’s notebook on the bare spot on my wall, and every night I see her in the stars before they fall.

Raina Alidjani

GORDAFARID IN LOVE

I’d done nothing to welcome love. My mother always warned me I would regret not being loved by a man.

“No man wants a woman with a shield and a sword in her hand, my beautiful Gordafarid.” She clucked her tongue at me, chopping herbs for stew as I put my boots on, readying myself for the training yard. I preferred it to the kitchen.

“War is coming,” said my father, one of Persia’s fiercest warriors. He clapped a calloused hand across my narrow back. “She must be trained. No daughter of mine will be captured when the Turanian army comes.”

“They’ll lose both their hands before laying one on me.” I grinned, looking up at Father. He gazed down at me with a prideful gleam in his eyes. Before we walked out the door, I glanced back at Mother, who shook her head and stirred her pot.

I wonder now, with a rope around my back and a kiss to my lips, if Mother would be pleased to see that I could be loved even with a sword in one hand.

I wonder if she would think it was she who finally taught me to be loveable: if the months we spent together after Father left to hold back the army of Turan, led by the power-hungry Sohrab, had instilled in me a softness that had been so desperately lacking under Father’s tutelage. Did she know that, when I cried myself to sleep, it was not only for my missing father? Did she know it was from frustration that I could not be with him?

After Father set out on his mission, Mother brought me back into the circle of women I had ignored since adolescence, and they welcomed me. There was far too much work to begrudge one girl who did not know her place. And so, I kept my head down and put myself to use—milking cows and tending to the crops, while news of desolation and destruction trickled into our village.

I wear Anahita around my neck, dangling from a pendant. She was a gift from Father when I was young. She is the goddess of womanly things—fertility, water, healing—but she is also the goddess of warriors. If both sides live in her, I wonder why it is so hard for our generals to see that I could be both. That my curves are not a sign of weakness to be dismissed but a weapon to be used. If they had let me, I would have been by Father’s side when it mattered most.

The moon went through two cycles before news of Father reached us. A rider came before dawn, with Father’s helm in his hands. Mother threw herself to the ground and wailed. I held her in my arms, allowing my rage to simmer beneath the surface until it could be best used.

The war reached us soon after that. The women were told to remain on the battlements, doing nothing but tearing at their gowns and screaming to the sky for Ahura Mazda’s mercy. None of us dared speak of it, but we all knew what would happen to us should the enemy breach our walls.

I refused to take my eyes off the battle long enough to bow my head in prayer. My cheeks turned black with rage. Rage at the army of Turan for thinking they could take the mighty Persia, but an even deeper vehemence towards our army for not showing them the error of their ways.

“That’s it,” I finally said as I witnessed our men beginning to retreat.

My mother grabbed at my tunic with a frenzied whimper. I am made of stone, whereas she is only made of straw. She could not hold me back.

I knotted my long waves, pinning them under my helmet, beseeching Anahita for her protection. Riding against the wave of deserters, I spat on them and cursed their offspring. They had no right to call themselves Persian.

I reached the enemy line. “Where are your heroes, your warriors, your tried and tested chieftains?” I roared. “I challenge your best to single combat to decide the victor of this battle.”

The roar of their celebration went silent. The soldiers’ eyes turned to me, filled with bloodlust for one last kill. For a moment, I thought they’d rush me, that I’d have to ride through them, taking as many as possible with me, over the Chinvat bridge, to the afterlife.

Then he emerged.

I knew it was Sohrab from the crest he wore—the legendary leader of the Turanian army. My breath hitched as I took him in. He was just as I pictured—a dark imposing figure, all sharp angles.

*This is for the best,* I thought, calming my heartbeat as I had been taught to. *A chance to cut off our enemy’s head.* I hoped Father would be proud when I saw him again, regardless of the outcome.

Sohrab dipped his head in a bow, accepting my terms, and in one swift move, I was off my horse with my sword drawn. A smile played across my lips as our blades met, caressing each other before pulling away, only to be drawn back together again after the briefest of moments, like twin flames. It was a feeling I had waited for all my life.

I found myself matched in might and swiftness. We danced around one another for nearly an hour—neither landing a blow. But I was getting closer; I could feel Anahita’s blessing coursing through my blood. His tall frame had slowed; his piercing amber eyes looked tired. Finally, with my sword above my head, I had a clear stroke—until a rope landed around my waist, pulling me to the ground.

“Cowards,” I spat at the cheating Turanians as they cheered.

I looked up at Sohrab. He had taken off his helmet and stood frozen, staring at me, his sharp features gone slack in surprise.

“What are you waiting for? Finish it.” I spat blood.

Then I realized my helm had been knocked off, my ebony waves spilling about me on the ground. The crowd went silent as he knelt beside me, tenderness replacing the ferocity in his eyes from moments earlier.

“I think I love you,” he breathed, stroking my face gently. “You are only a woman but my match in every single way.”

“And you are mine.” I let my eyes settle on his, tilting my head ever so slightly in invitation.

He did not hesitate to take what he wanted, placing his mouth on mine. I sank into the kiss for a moment—satiating my curiosity—before taking what I wanted and plunging my sword into his side.

Kaci O’Meara

NO PLEASURE IN A MAN’S WORLD

women are taught from a young age

to be *prim* and *proper*

prettied up in pink

sit with your legs shut so the boys don’t see your underwear

smile a pretty smile

he’s only pulling your pigtails because he likes you, sweetie

we are taught from a young age

that our bodies are not for us, but for the pleasure of men

never the pleasure of ourselves

I’ve never been one to sit in quiet rebellion

so I scream, not attempting to hold any sound back

in the dead of night, under the light of the moon

when I’m free to go against the tide of what is expected of me

or in broad daylight with a microphone in my hand

screaming, “I will not conform!”

unsure if it’s a promise to myself or a promise to the women who came before me

Lewis Brown

MARY AUSTIN, I FEEL LIKE I KNOW YOU

Perhaps we dated,

back before you met Freddie Mercury

and I had just broken up with Renate Blauel.

Me, all flush with the promises of comphet and youth.

You, kind, with your many tasteful jackets and symmetrical hair.

I can see why he proposed.

Why he gave you a box

with another box inside it,

and another box inside that box,

then many box-layers deeper, a ring—

As if challenging you to get to the heart of him. As if saying:

You’re already there and you were.

It didn’t fail just because it’s over

and it isn’t even over now he’s dead,

let alone when he came out to you in 1976.

Although there was no shortage of newspapers

to insist it was all or nothing, to transume what you had

into suffering. “Ex-fiance.” Your “quiet pain,” his “secret.”

Like authenticity was kept by and not from him.

Mary Austin, I think I know your joy.

I think I know what the two of you had,

how you found that tenderness that is forged in kind negotiation,

that does not alter when it alteration finds

but alters its approach, opens its confines,

that knows consent is an adventure

that exhales inexorable comfort, inhales inalienable trust.

It’s not for me to put a name on

but a sham attempt at straightness it was not.

Emma Wells

BASILISK

Words convey meaningless tatters

spirally, spinning midair

formally obtuse, coldly distant

their purpose is clear

immediacy holds them

while a reptilian tongue itches to be free

Subtle glances convey different messages

real, truthful, transparent

frustrating balminess draws her back

as needless eyelids evaporate

Cold shoulders offer little reward –

a sure way to avoid exposing the truth

becoming a familiar, fake habit

Not her. Who is she?

An unloveable scaly shell screams

yet appears heartlessly silent

stone cold as unspoken myths

Her private self – a total contrast

allowing raw emotions

to form, flow, fluctuate

beating to a basilisk drum

Lizard warmth exists here

comfortingly invigorating

Lucidity bites pleasurably

long-awaited yet poignantly welcome

pointed teeth are sensual, serpentine

Veins course with intrigue

an enchanted fever

basilisk-blissful

Melancholy drinks its fill

writhing through loving, free emotion

with scaled, honed fingertips

Affection forever painted with sadness

a blot as luminescent markings

Her tainted nature dispels glory

willingly labouring under heavyweight wings

Unquenchable. Unquestionable. Undying . . .

A basilisk stretches its wingspan

hypnotic extensions transfix

dangerous yet longed-for fire expels . . .

roaring, propelling passion-fuelled bursts

flames of symbiotic love

are paradigms of strength, potency, loyalty

A dragon’s heart is fairytale faithful

legend bound

Reality tries to force a retreat

(to bottled capture)

she writhes, bashes against transparent confines

an unnatural, glass-walled cage

blasts to smithereens

Her splendour too rich for containment

suppression . . .

Ropes, lashes fight to cull her vibrancy

an unmatched, unravelled passion . . .

Fiery halos emit heavenly signals

siren calls of unbeatable, leviathan strength

to brethren basilisks

sisters of scarlet.

Bonds unleash, snapping . . .

disentangling from serpent skin

impenetrably elusive, dazzlingly hot

Luminescent hues of regal purple

smash her goblet prison

demonstrating reckless rebellion

Uncontainable feminine desire strives

charges from shivery infringement

where frozen hearts emit sepia tones

(forgettable existences)

Glass fragments crunch

shattering under clawed, dragon feet

she stands victoriously awakened

on de-constructed, male bonds

A drakaina proudly pants

effeminately bestial

victoriously alive

awakened

freed

D. Rudd-Mitchell

REMOVED

I sometimes read a blog by my eco-warrior friend Jenni. Jenni thinks COVID was nature’s way of managing the population. Her blog says, ‘Sad as death and loss are, we should accept death as having benefits to our ecology and environment.’ Jenni told me she isn’t being unkind or insensitive because she would accept her own death and the deaths of her close friends and family as being both personally tragic but ultimately advantageous to the survival of our planet. She believes more people will die if we don’t take the environmental collapse seriously. I asked if she would accept my death, and she said she would. Jenni thinks the planet has a right to protect itself from all of us. Her blog says if we find a little death scary, we should do more to stop climate crime and mass extinction.

Jenni receives a lot of abusive comments from the non-green community, and she was banned from the COVID chat rooms recently. Quite a lot of Jenni’s responders replied they’d clap if she got COVID; she clarified people were free to express themselves, but they had misinterpreted the nuance of her position. The angriest replies Jenni got were from Muddzy96, who felt Jenni was a disgrace for believing in a false plague. Muddzy96 said the plague was a lie circulated by the system to erode social freedoms. Someone else called Chri5tr3d3mpti0n said the plague was God’s reaction to society’s abominations; Chri5tr3d3mpti0n was also removed from the discussion by a moderator.

I don’t write on forums because I cannot grasp the difference between literal and nonliteral comments; I don’t understand people very well, which is why I am known as the geeky boy at college who likes *Star Wars* and wants a robot friend. To be honest, I think a lot of people would like a robot friend.

On the news, they showed that some older people in a northern town had been given robotic pets. A robot pet isn’t what I want: I want a robot to talk to me. A robot has no feelings and could listen to me speaking every day and never feel angry, upset, bored, or frustrated, even when I repeatedly discuss the same topics because they interest me. I like to plan my day and a robotic companion would be able to plan the day with me. I also like to talk about food and a robotic friend would never tell me to stop thinking about lunch or dinner during breakfast.

Jenni told me that as an eco educator she thinks it is environmentally unsound for humans to have robotic companions. She also believes analyzing science fiction has given her a deep cultural foreboding about the disarray that would ensue if humans ever mass-produce robots. Her fear comes from novels like *The* *Stepford Wives*. Jenni suspects *The* *Stepford Wives* is a veiled threat to all feminists that their misogynist husbands could circumvent women’s liberation by incinerating women and replacing them with subservient robots.

Jenni also thinks it’s environmentally dangerous that robots do jobs instead of people in places like car factories. She said the rate at which machines can work is a factor in escalating the environmental crisis and climate atrocities currently impacting us. If people were the ones to make cars, they would make a lot fewer cars.

I worry because I don’t want to be with real people and I don’t want to be lonely. I looked up loneliness in a database; it said lonely people are thirty times more likely to die prematurely. Medical databases are full of phobias that can be potential precursors to loneliness:

Androphobia, the fear of men; anthropophobia, the fear of people; atelophobia, the fear of imperfection; atychiphobia, the fear of failure. Gamophobia, the fear of marriage, and gynophobia, the fear of women. I wonder if some people have phobias that might make other people lonely too. People like Jenni are scared of robots, and maybe that could be called droidaphobia.

Jenni also told me if we had robots it wouldn’t be like I imagine it. She thinks the rich would have robots made by Rolls-Royce and BMW, and the poor would have supermarket-brand ‘app-fordable’ robots that did fewer things and broke quickly. She thinks house robots would be servants more than friends. If Jenni is right, I might never get a companion.

Bo, the teaching assistant at my college, said it is very important for me to be clear that when I say ‘companion droid’ I mean a droid designed to talk and nothing else. He advised me to clarify that I want a droid that offers automated, natural-sounding conversational companionship. Bo warned me there will be confusion if I say I want a robot that provides ‘interaction for socially distanced humans’.

Jenni said that Pygmalion’s statue and Frankenstein’s bride objectified women, and I had to be clear that I did not want a droid that objectified women. I said I wanted my droid to look like C-3PO. Jenni said that was a bit different and she did see how companion droids could help lonely people.

This is when Jenni wondered if droids could be made from biodegradable, ethically sourced recyclable parts and powered by the sun.

The idea gave me some hope for the future. She is going to raise a discussion of this on her blog when her latest ban is over. I started a green invention list too and added some new ideas for popular items:

Wooden lightsabers

Wooden TIE fighters

Wooden *Millennium Falcon*

Christina Hennemann

WEEDING

My father was obsessed with weeding:

patio weeder in hand, no morsel of moss

in the cracks between paving stones

escaped his picking and plucking.

And the lawn, *oh!* What uproar at the sight

of a dandelion leaf, budding, screaming

the arrival of a sunny blot on the green—

*Ha!* Fierce cut with the trowel, uprooted soil,

his hands could rest then for a while,

steadied when all was in order: *pure*,

overlooking the blood-brown wounds, until

he spotted the blooming red between my lips,

growing louder and wild, stubborn roots

hiding cunningly in cerebral crevices.

He cut, pulled, dug deep unremittingly to contain

the plague, but the weeds always won the fight.

I never asked him why he did it, his answer

was planted within me

from the beginning:

Life is chaos, and the tormented exorcism

of fear.

Odi Welter

YE WITHOUT SIN

A thousand years ago,

I would have been stoned

in the square

by my father and brothers

who cannot see the way I mirror them,

condemned by my mother

who grieves only for the daughter,

and hated by my sisters

who fear they will face the same.

Take the Ten Commandments,

break them over my head,

pelt me with the pieces

until they bury so deep into my skin

I can no longer separate myself

from Moses and the mount.

Grind my sins into dust,

inject them into my veins,

blood into cement

as strong as the Romans,

thicker than the water

I failed to walk on.

Let me drown in the lake with Peter,

let my faithlessness sink me

under the waves.

Baptized in stones,

crimson blossoms blooming on my dress,

ripped and knotted together

between my legs.

Purity is the gravest insult.

Sins mark me like freckles,

let them number greater

than the stars in the sky,

than the sands in the desert.

I will draw constellations,

let the granules filter through my fingers,

bury myself up to the neck.

If love beyond conditions is a sin,

call me a sinner.

Petra Zajc

THE ROOTS OF HER SOUL

She could remember taking walks around the rural neighbourhood, where a curtain of trees hid the unassuming river, where her dog could bound freely, and where she would often take her shoes off to feel the dewy grass between her toes. But things had drastically changed. Now, the river was fully exposed – the trees had been forced apart to make way for a concrete road, and where there used to be the singing of robins, sparrows, and tits, the rhythm of her steps was now dictated by the sound of cranes and wrecking balls.

She soon began to crave the cruel and self-effacing tranquillity of nature and started to move away from the roaring and the buzzing of machines. Upon every new path taken, the devices of industry seemed to follow her. The parks and strategically placed rows of trees might’ve looked nice, but her heart was heavy and her soul silent in disappointment. She couldn’t run barefoot and carefree in the park the same way she could through the untamed meadow, and sitting by the marble fountain wasn’t the same as dipping her toes in the river.

She missed dancing around the fire and dressing up to scare the dreadful winter away. Even winter was now more sombre than dreadful. Where were the days of *gregorčki*, the river lanterns that thanked and honoured the complementary elements of nature? When did teddy bears, chocolate hearts, and insignificant plastic trinkets on a day with no meaningful heritage become a worthy substitute for the first day of spring, when birds carried the prophecies and predictions of the woman’s future husband?

She observed other people and voiced her concerns, but she was always stopped halfway and met with: ‘The times have changed. We’re not those ancient savages anymore, believing in the god of thunder and leaving out food and boots for their *domovoj.’*

And in the back of her mind, only one thought prevailed: *But I am.*

She started to pull away, always seeking the less-trodden paths where she could prolong the sense of belonging and her connection with the spirits of nature. Whenever she settled somewhere for a bit, people ridden with greed and no appreciation for the raw order of nature followed. She would soon have to move again before hotels and resorts and tennis courts rose from the ground. With every swing of an axe and every shovel that ripped through the earth, a bit of her soul was chipped away.

She soon found herself in the unforgiving part of the Alps, where angels feared to tread, and there she tried to make peace with the ever- and fast-changing world that was steadily leaving her behind and letting her down.

She closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath, and felt the nature around her with her whole being. When she opened her eyes again, she detected movement in her peripheral vision. At first, it seemed it was just another regular wild chamois, still spectacular to witness, but upon taking her time to observe the animal, the golden glint of its horns and the pure white pelt stirred something in her.

The creature she thought only existed today in cunning advertisements and as a beer mascot was munching on a rare tuft of grass, and she whispered in awe: ‘The Goldhorn.’

The beast lifted its head and stared at her as if knowing its name had been called, then slowly approached her.

‘I thought it was all just a myth.’

As she carefully lifted her hand to stroke the mythological animal’s head, a voice from behind startled her. ‘That’s my favourite thing about these myths. Everyone tells you it’s not true, and yet you can’t help but wonder.’

She gazed upon the stranger who wore a mighty pelt with colourful ribbons. Tucked around his belt were smaller pelts and a row of cowbells. The bells caused a ruckus that echoed across the valley whenever he moved. His looks did not tell her to take him entirely seriously, but something about the familiarity of him instructed her core to show him the utmost respect.

‘You’re Kurent.’

He grinned right before he launched himself into the air, spun, and landed gracefully. The noise from the cowbells made her teeth rattle in her head.

Then he said, ‘You’re most correct, m’lady.’ On the second syllable of ‘m’lady’, she saw the unnatural twist of his long and wicked tongue.

‘But how?’

‘But how, what?’

She looked at the Goldhorn and then at Kurent again. ‘How are you two here? How are you real?’

Kurent dropped down on the rock next to her and started polishing one of the cowbells with his thumb. ‘Perseverance.’ He made a dramatic pause before he continued, ‘Which, I believe, you’re well acquainted with.’

She scoffed. The sound was part laugh, part stifled cry. ‘I’d say it’s the other way around. It seems like this world hurts me with its every move.’

‘Oh, you know, what’s new? Am I right?’

She didn’t know what he meant, and the silence of their stares was filled with the sounds of the Goldhorn munching on grass.

Kurent began: ‘When has the world ever been kind to us? Slavs enslaved, Slavs as cannon fodder. Slavs left to starve, Slavs left to be slaughtered by the Turks. Slavs, the next in line for ethnic genocide as imagined by the Nazis. And we’re still considered the lesser, the brutes, the savage tribe today, aren’t we?’

As she listened to him compiling the list, she felt an odd amount of pride for her people and a great deal of resentment – both for those who had harmed her kin and for herself. She wished she could do more, push back and prove to them all that she and her people weren’t obscure and little.

‘How can I be considered a part of that?’ she asked. ‘Every cut-down tree gets to me, every new construction clenches my heart, every globalised festival that makes us forget our own folk customs plunges me into despair. Those are not characteristics of someone belonging to a tribe that survived genocides, massacres, and famines.’

‘You’re here, are you not? Despite all of that, you’re here. Despite all of that, your beliefs remain untouched and your connection with this ancient culture stronger than ever.’ Kurent poked the pendant in the shape of a crescent moon that hung around her neck before catching it between his thumb and index finger. ‘It’s been a while since I last saw a *lunula.*’Kurent seemed to get lost in thought and a nostalgic smile crept up on his face. However, it soon faded and he let go of the pendant. ‘Who is to say that the things that hurt you aren’t painful or important? Trees being removed, the dances and festivities fading into the past as if we’re to be ashamed of them. It’s all just about getting rid of spirits, to kill something in us. Does it feel that way to you?’

She took a moment to consider his words. The more she thought about it, the more her heart ached to act, to change the new disconnected and detached ways of the world, and then, with tears welling up in her eyes, she said, ‘It feels like our ways are dying and we’re being moulded to appease greed and do anything to turn a profit regardless of the consequences, to abandon our sense of community, and to become another ingredient in a blend of nations that once celebrated their heritage but now only keep it recorded in books nobody wants to read. I want us to be in touch with our surroundings, to participate in our communities, and take care of each other. I want us to have celebrations because it feels right to be thankful for love and abundance, not because those in charge are hoping to fill their pockets.’ She stopped and drew in a slow breath to steady herself. ‘I want us to go back to our real ways.’

Quiet thunder could be heard from distant clouds, and Kurent smiled knowingly. ‘Perun seems to agree with you.’

Fearfully, she looked up at the sky, as if she could, for the first time, see things clearly and herself be seen. Above all else, however, she felt heard, and by none other than the god of thunder himself. She felt like somebody was finally on her side, and that what she felt in her heart to be true wasn’t a lost cause or something not worth fighting for.

‘The world has changed,’ Kurent announced, and a feeling of paralysing anxiety spread through even the smallest crevices of her being. ‘But maybe not as much as you think.’

When she looked up at him, half expectantly and half in disbelief, he gave her a warm but uneven smile.

‘Are people not protesting the cutting down of trees? Aren’t they moving closer to nature and vacationing in the dead of the forest instead of going to concrete beaches? Do people not cooperate and help each other in times of need?’

She scoffed bitterly. ‘All people care about is themselves. Even if that means throwing everyone else under the bus.’

‘Perhaps. Perhaps outside in the world, perhaps in some places here as well.’

She shook her head, visions of selfish encounters she had seen dancing lively before her eyes. ‘Not perhaps. Not maybe. It is certain.’

Kurent held his breath for a moment and exchanged a glance with the Goldhorn. She thought she had managed to convince him. Later, when she would look back on this moment, she would realise he’d probably waited for her to calm down. ‘Let’s use a real-life example,’ he finally said. ‘The past few summers have been very demanding for you. The floods, the fires, natural disaster upon natural disaster. Remind me, how did people react?’

She was quick to answer. ‘They helped each other out. The firefighters, the army, the electricians, the foresters. They dispersed to cover as much ground as possible.’

‘Huh,’ Kurent hummed with a satisfied grin. ‘When you put it like that, it almost sounds as if everything else faded away and only the importance of community remained.’

She stared at him, exasperated. ‘Everybody’s friendly when they need help.’

When Kurent left her in silence, the cogs in her head began to turn the other way. She considered what she had heard from the recent news. Slovaks, Czechs, Poles, Croats, and Ukrainians helping Slovenes, her people, without any political agenda. They sent money, manpower, and equipment.

‘I will only say this,’ he said.‘The soul of community stretches beyond the borders of nationality. And Slavic roots are strong and deep.’ She was too stunned to speak, and when he received no response, he instructed her: ‘Close your eyes, child.’

The Goldhorn, who seemed to have been minding his own business the entire time, was now right by her side. He lightly poked her with his gold horns as if to urge her to hurry up with it. Right before she closed her eyes, she saw Kurent close his as well. He began to hum as if he were calling on an ancient wisdom, and an air full of mythological life force swirled around them.

She let the darkness fall upon her eyelids; the dark, however, did not last long. Suddenly, before her, she could see invasions of other tribes, the burning down of villages, children and babies being taken away from their mother’s arms by the Turks and the Nazis, entire families stuffed into concentration camps. She saw men rebelling with pitchforks and later being tortured with red-hot iron pincers. Men setting bonfires to send fire signals about the incoming invasion from the East. She saw men travelling abroad, working hard, back-breaking jobs to send money home to their families, and she saw children being beaten up for calling plums *slive* and bears *medvedki* instead of using their German counterparts.

The scene shifted, and she saw people holding hands and dancing, and a mother teaching her daughter how to braid her hair. She saw a beautifully dreadful Morana calling to the cold brutal winds and the deadly snowstorm to swallow up the land before Kurent scared her away. And Vesna, the bringer of spring, evoked buds out of flowers and woke the animals from their sleep. She saw the hunched figure of Baba Yaga stalking boys through the forest, and the Goldhorn standing proud on a mountain ledge as a hunter was swallowed by an avalanche, the young man’s eyes still fixed on the precious prize. She saw young men working in the fields and women weaving lace while a *domovoj* stood in the background and released upon the family every blessing that his magical disposition allowed him. Girls running through the forest with freshly woven baskets, carrying food for everyone who was busy working in the fields to ensure they would escape Morana’s unforgiving winters. And then she saw today’s youth fighting for nature, children being fascinated by the carnival parade with kurents, Slavic nations giving each other concessions in a foreign and unknown country, all of them seeing each other not as cultural allies, but as family – wherever in the world that may be.

She at last opened her eyes, which were now filled with tears. Whether it was sorrow or joy, she could not say. But whatever it was, there was a great deal of pride present. The first thing she saw was the Goldhorn gazing at her with his front two legs neatly folded.

‘What was that?’ she asked Kurent. He seemed exhausted, yet strangely rejuvenated, as if it had been a long time since he had been able to go over his memories with someone.

‘The unfaltering spirit of your people,’ he replied. ‘Remember this: perseverance comes from spirit, not from lucky circumstance. And everything you saw, that’s all in you as well.’

She stuttered before she managed to utter a fully formed sentence. ‘But all of that is disappearing, dying. The world’s moving away from it.’

A shadow fell upon Kurent’s face, like he was not just hearing her words, but actually feeling and understanding them, perhaps even seeing that his pantheon had become a mere story and his historical presence a cute little dress-up habit for the entertainment of children. For the first time, she saw him as less of a prankster and more like something mystical and terrible.

The Goldhorn got back on his feet and nervously glanced around before nudging her in a hasty goodbye. He bounded away as if sensing something was looming on the horizon. She couldn’t understand what disrupted a being of his kind so much until she looked at Kurent once again. It was then she understood why he was such a prominent and influential being. She understood how even someone like Morana dared not trifle with him.

She felt something in her soul stir and cower when he spoke next.

‘We see and feel it all.’

‘We?’

With the next booming thunder, as if they had obeyed the call of Perun, four other figures appeared before her and instilled in her the same fearful respect as Kurent did.

There was a woman with long wavy hair kept in place by a flower crown, the flowers like *perunika* seemingly waning. She wore a long white tunic, the hem of which was marred by mud and what looked like spilled petrol with bits of broken glass. The rest of her tunic was ornamented with old pagan patterns resembling flowers and wheat. She looked stunning but not serene; her hand tightly gripped a clay figure of a lark, and the girl could swear she saw cracks appearing.

Another woman stood beside her. Her hair had grey streaks. There were black bags under her eyes, and she was holding three oddly thin crying babies. She looked tired and overworked, as though she had been left completely alone in raising the children, towards whom she felt nothing but disdain.

With the two women were two men. One had golden locks that seemed to emit sun rays, and the girl could feel those same rays mercilessly scorching off her skin and lightening her hair. He did not appear as a warm, kind sun, but as a betrayed and scarred god.

The other man was an elderly gentleman dressed in expensive dark-green robes, the patterns on which were formed by glittering jewels. Out of them all, he seemed the kindest until she saw that the priceless jewels were covered in blood and the bear cub known as his companion was merely a head, nothing more than a hunting trophy of an extinct animal.

These were not the gods she was familiar with. They used to be grand and inspiring, and now they seemed to be only shadows of their former selves. Then she remembered. Gods were nature, and nature had suffered greatly.

‘Vesna. Mokosh. Kresnik. Veles,’ she whispered. She was momentarily filled with so much life, yet something about their sad and polluted appearance made her both angry and very worried.

Kurent stepped in front of them all, looking nothing like the kind trickster from before.

A gentle breeze hugged her neck, playfully tugging at her hair even as it ravaged the trees of a ski resort on the slopes below. A voice was carried on the wind, an ancient growl she innately recognised as Perun, the god of thunder. ‘The usurper ways of profiteers cannot tame us. And they will soon know that nature will not succumb to their orders. They will learn that *they* are to listen to nature, to abide by communities and people’s lives, and not by the rules of profit. And they will have to learn how to grow back the human soul that they have lost and burnt.’

All five Slavic gods stood before her and with a deafening thunder, they each unleashed their own wrath, disintegrated into the air, and massacred everything that dared to slaughter their land.

She stood on the mountaintop and gazed down at all the destruction, the disasters unleashed as one big lesson to all who chipped away pieces of their empathy and the importance of nature one by one. Seeing it all unravel before her, she finally understood what her grandmother always told her: ‘Nature will have its revenge.’

Oenone Thomas

FORMS OF PROTEST

*Coffee?* I offer.

*No*. You are emphatic, grinning.

Off coffee?

*No.* Positive, grin widening.

*No*, I repeat.

*No*, you say again, nodding.

I’m waiting, only half-accepting.

Tea?

*No.* Now you laugh. You tell me,

I’m practising.

You drag your rucksack from the car,

lean it against my open door,

unload the props of your stay:

scuffed loaf, squashed cheese,

bottle of red safeguarded

in your old scarf,

a book presented – *Forms of Protest*.

You pause, take in the room,

noting what has not changed.

Alisa Lindfield-Pratt

1982

Me

Fighting and denying

That I like girls

But woefully losing

Trapped in Thatcher’s Britain

Oppression

Economic disaster

War and terrorism

Father

Captain in the Royal Marines

Meets crown and country call

Before me

Mother

Living in France

With her toy boy

Lost to me long ago

Stepmother

Cop

Someone who cared

Until I found them and her

They spoke with my heart

Against the establishment

For the different

Music, sex, fashion

The anarchists

The punks

The goths

The queers

She was a teacher

But not my teacher

An idol

Proud and unashamed

A scandal

On the eve of his departure

For the Falklands

Now will my parents see me?

Alshaad Kara

BECAUSE I AM A NOBODY

*Unrecognisable* is my motto

since I am just a shadow.

The respect I deserve

I never got

because others had their preference.

I just longed to be somebody,

wished to be anybody,

still, in the shadow

of my mind,

I was still a nobody.

But in the end,

this allowed me to revolt

and lose myself to mutiny.

For if I was somebody,

I would not be able to be dissident.

Dana Knott

RESOLUTIONS

Make love every morning. Sunlight glorifies

the body. Admire the afterglow. Mirrors

only tell lies at midnight. A shower

after sex is a religious experience.

Pores open up like tiny mouths to breathe.

Write your name and your lover’s

in the steam, then watch them fade away.

Never forget that everything is temporary.

Do harmful things. Indulge in gluttony.

Smoke unfiltered cigarettes. Give no fucks.

Wreck yourself at least once. Healing

is the body’s sacred forgiveness.

Time to update your idea of reality.

Pray this year will feed a new sensation.

Shantha Chinniah

SHADOW

Drill

Lok swore softly as coffee escaped the lip of the cup, missing his shirt by a special miracle. He had to stop being so careless; he could lose the whole job. They needed everything pristine. Everything to be exactly the same as Him. Continuity.

He’d got better at hiding how stressed these places made him. There was tension in the air that made his breathing shallow as soon as he entered. He found a good trick was to force a yawn and then hold on to the bored expression that came in its slipstream. He’d used it often during these waits. When he was visible to the public, though, he did his best to frown like He did. Lok looked the vision of power itself, but in the dead time before an appearance he was a human afterthought as people sped around him, arguing and exchanging urgent messages and objects. He tried his best not to cause trouble for them, although he always seemed to be in the wrong place, even if it was where they’d left him.

Now that he’d been here over an hour, he realised that the charged atmosphere was more than the usual shift from the calm banal of the cabin he shared with his partner Lia. For a start, he’d twigged what His codename was sooner than usual. It was a private game he played with himself on these jobs, and he was usually confident that he’d worked it out by the end. He was never sure why he wasn’t told outright. Maybe they thought it would prevent him from getting into character, would highlight the charade. This time it was Obsidian. He was sure of it. One of the ways he got hints would be that the eyes of the staffers would briefly beam onto him, as if paying tribute, when they were talking about Him. Mostly they’d continue talking briskly amongst themselves, with Lok an impassive witness. There had been two of these episodes already today.

Esteemed Guard Teej was higher up than most of the team Lok got to meet. He had the uniform of the inner guard – or at least the innermost circle that people got to know about. Teej rarely spoke to Lok, but today he made him recite the plan: where he was to stand, what he was to do at each beat. As far as Lok could tell, he’d remembered the script well enough, since Teej moved on without comment. As they probed him, it was the first time Lok had noticed how pale the guard’s eyes were. They seemed to just reflect the world back.

Danger. There was more danger today.

The suit they’d given him was of poorer quality than usual, a cheap synthetic fibre thing that was hell in the heat. He was sure he’d have a rash by the end of the job. His skin already felt clammy and prickly. It must have been the only one they could find big enough to fit over the bulletproof vest they’d insisted on for this gig. He wished they’d planned it better instead of palming this cheap copy off on him. It looked enough like the real suit though, and that was all they needed.

His stomach felt alive and he needed to move. They were in a vast room, with all subdividers folded back to the sides. It was just after noon but the lights were on inside. The windows were all boarded, but they had left a small gap at the bottom of one to placate Captain Marlene’s smoking habit. Lok made his pilgrimage to the thin vein of air. The more he was conscious of drawing attention to himself, the more he was aware of how he walked. He padded flat-footed across the room and let out his breath by the window.

He jumped involuntarily as the radios of the two young assistants near him gave a salvo of feedback. The one closest to him jumped too, he noticed.

As he was trying to stop his brain whizzing through the reasons for the threat he felt today, he wished he’d kept himself informed. Before, he’d enjoyed the fact that his simple life with Lia was so utterly separate. It helped him distance himself from the chaos. He thought it had made his employers suspicious at first, but after he’d passed the observation and vetting, Lok was sure they saw it as an advantage. After his looks, of course.

He’d met Lia during their military service. She was from the countryside and had only moved to the city for work when her father lost his job as a farm engineer. His brothers couldn’t understand why he wanted to marry her. His previous girlfriend, Amila, was a member of the Bron family, a cousin of his eldest brother’s wife. She had prospects, knew the right crowd, all that. Lok’s lack of ambition had frustrated her. He had never known what he felt for Amila, other than a general kind of goodwill. Lia was different; she offered him the possibility of a kind of life he’d never considered before. She was quieter and more measured than anyone he’d been close to, but she was ambitious too, in her way. It felt more like a survival need with her, though.

They were the first round of fresh recruits that were put straight on the urban home campaigns. It was the height of the Yellow Stick Rebellion – over a year in – and the state machinery was focused on suppressing it as quickly as possible. It was a baptism of fire and one that left deep rents in them both, that remained only camouflaged with time. Once they were discharged, they wanted a slower future. They bought the small cottage that they still lived in, two hours out of the city and not far from where she grew up. Lia used her experience fixing machines on the farm and in the army to establish herself as a handywoman. She supplemented this by making leathercraft to sell to tourists, which took over as her main occupation ten years ago when her back got worse. He’d bought a boat with the inheritance from his great uncle, Finnar, when he was twenty-two. From then on, he took visitors and the occasional commuter across the bay, five journeys there and back per day, three on Sundays. They didn’t even have a computer at home; their neighbours let them use theirs if needed.

The radio barked out what sounded like: *Catscradle upped to black level. Expected target Obsidian. Placement change.* The assistant rushed to join the huddle of frantic discussion by the water machine.

He’d started working these assignments by random coincidence. On one boatload of tourists was a woman he had served with, though only briefly, as she’d got transferred to intelligence after her first month. There was bitterness in his group of recruits at that, lots of talk of ‘connections’. She hadn’t noticed him when she first got on the boat, but when she did, she not only recognised him but was intensely interested in his life. He had been confused by the attention until a week later when she dropped by their cottage and made the offer. She was still working in intelligence and said they’d been looking for someone like him for a long time. He hadn’t wanted to do it, but each job paid more than Lia and he earned in a year. Lia said he’d be stupid not to. Now they were able to see a doctor when they needed, and he found this restored some dignity he hadn’t realised he’d lost. The adrenaline that came with the work still made him nauseous though, even two years in.

‘What’re you doing *there*? There’s been a change to the plan. We’re cutting down your stage time. Mya has a copy of the new script, go and see her.’

Lok tried to apologise but the assistant had already left so he set out into the main battleground of the room, walking slowly as he tried to remember who Mya was. He thought a Mya had briefed him before, maybe at that Civic Centre opening last summer. He just wished he was better with faces. Short of someone having a gnarled scar, faces just registered with a generic face-y quality. If someone changed their hair colour, they may as well have made themselves into a different person. A staffer carrying a honeycomb of coffee cups tutted as they bumped into him.

Lok arrived at the centre of the cavernous space, having decided Mya was likely to be in the animated group by the whiteboard. He paused at the sudden increase in the volume of the room. There was always security, naturally, but at least twenty additional Special Protection Force guards had come in and bunched around the base of the huge doors at the end of the room.

Shit. More armed guards? Shit.

He felt a fat sweat trickle creep down the range of his spine. He carefully shook his head and his hands to distract from the sensation. He could now see that the guards were doing checks on the catering staff bringing the sandwich buffets into the room. A harassed-looking woman steered him over to a small group with blue lanyards. Perhaps this was Mya. As she strode, he walked into a veil of frangipane scent, which struck him as familiar.

That sweat used to torment him during stakeouts. Recruitment to the forces had exploded following the insurrection that stormed the Secret Service compound. This meant his intake of national service conscripts was stuck with heavy old armour to save the best gear for the proper mercenaries. Their training was condensed into three weeks, and then Lok was assigned to covert surveillance. They’d had intel that rebel groups had pop-up meetings in the closed-down offices and shops of the Kinmane neighbourhood, so small groups of soldiers would lie in wait amongst the ruin. This waiting ballooned his tension. That’s when he would feel the sweat teasing his spine, unable to do anything about it. As they got to know each other, the postings he’d had with Lia became a salvation. She would chat to him in her soft, easy way, and the demons would pale to grey.

Most were false alarms. The first bust was just an unarmed ragtag of community college students wanting the thrill of talking rebellion. The next was serious, a splinter group of the Bracket Lines guerrillas. The raw violence of his unit’s response in the first case and his palpating fear of his own death in the second reorganised something in the structure of his being that made the subsequent two years and eight months of service the experience of another person.

‘Sir, have you got that? Please confirm you understand the instructions. We go live in twenty.’

The small group was staring at him intently. Frangipane filled his nostrils as Mya came right up to him, stressing to go on stage only after the music started. The smell was a gust of memory he couldn’t place. He thought of Lia and hoped this event would be unremarkable.

Action

The sky was grey but with a bright acid glare that gave away the heat. The stage was ready. Wide, gleaming white, elevated a few metres off the ground. It had been erected in forty-eight hours by the project team specifically engaged to create the edifice of the state wherever required. In the centre of the white backdrop, in thick black graphics, was the round cog of the Party, teeth facing out, encasing the stylised dark rose of the state. A fence of armed guards marked the base of the construction, and more lined the wings of the stage. The chosen crowd waited quietly for Governor Orlot to welcome Grand Premier Mortens on his visit to the state. It was to be widely broadcast, though not live.

It was now 10.50. The event had been scheduled to commence at 10.30.

Lok was in the car with the staffers with blue lanyards. The itchiness under the vest and suit was now so tormenting that he wanted to rip his skin off. As a distraction, he looked out of the tinted window and saw the Mortens delegation already waiting outside their cars. As the radios buzzed, his team began moving – handshakes, make-up touch-ups, consulting scripts. But Lok was kept in the car while the grand premier and his people ascended the steps to the stage.

The sound system announced Grand Premier Mortens, the spark that started the crowd’s clapping. No one had told Lok to get out of the car, but the team around the stairs on his side of the stage were looking around impatiently, talking into their radios. He always felt helpless in these scenarios, like a hand-held child waiting to be told when it was safe to cross. None of the people in his car spoke, but he found them pushing him out into the noise. Lok shielded his eyes and looked at the stage where Mortens already stood, his face all scowl.

He expects Orlot to be here already . . .

Lok found himself hurrying to his side of the stage as Mortens looked like he was about to leave. At the foot of the stairs, Mya held his arm. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw guards running towards them but he didn’t have time to look properly because, as the state anthem ‘The Thorn of Glory’ burst through the speakers, he was pushed up the staircase.

At the top, the force stunned him still. His tinnitus whined, and he felt a few drops of warm rain fall on his bald scalp in slow motion. In the maelstrom of sensation, he was pulled through the rubble, acrid smoke, and blood. Blood and body gore. He shut his eyes tight, his body coursing with the nightmare, and let himself be hauled to the back exit by the small, firm grip of the guard.

Close

Lok must have passed out. He was lying on a camp bed piled with thick woven blankets. He was too hot, but he couldn’t find the energy to move them off him. The room was dark, as if underground. He could see shapes of people in the light cast by a few weak lamps. No one had noticed he was awake and he lay in utter confusion. Lok closed his eyes again. Nothing made sense.

The bomb. Had it missed him by accident or incompetence? He wasn’t sure. It seemed impossible to believe that any rebel group would bypass the opportunity to kill both Governor Orlot and Grand Premier Mortens, but the day had been so strange that he wasn’t certain of anything now. Did they know he wasn’t the real thing? Had he been saved by the state forces or was he a prisoner of the rebels? A scream died in his mouth as he worked to control himself. Fleetingly, he considered that he might already be dead.

As he breathed deeply, he warded off the worst of the panic and began to tune into the furtive conversations. He realised they were making escape plans, that other members were arriving soon to move them on. Rebels then, he decided. He felt a stab of fear as one of the women turned around and gestured towards him, saying he wasn’t ready to be moved.

Lia.

As they noticed he was awake, they came towards his bed. Suddenly, he smelt frangipane, and seeing her with Lia, he realised why Mya’s fragrance had been familiar. She was part of Lia’s leathercraft group that met every Friday afternoon in their cottage. They’d often be finishing up when he got home from the boat. He wondered how many others in this room had plotted murder in their home.

‘Calm there, Lok. Here now, have some water, love. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. It was too risky. Do you understand? You had to be believable.’

Alex Cregan

NEW FORM GENESIS

Here’s to the body unholy and marred,

crouched over the bath like New Eden.

The first worst mistake of your life was being born,

the second was giving a shit.

It would cost nothing to leave, Eve, to

grow from the rib they stole for you and

bloom, ascending past nirvana into the stars.

You had to be like this, though.

Had to listen to that stupid little pacemaker in your chest, those

heaving, pathetic lungs.

Here’s to the body, buried in the garden.

Here’s to the eyes, gouged out.

Let yourself drown here; let yourself die.

If you could find heaven, you would have already tried.

But no, go ahead and cry

at the feet of the gods.

Beg for forgiveness,

Shapeshifter.

Crush your own bones to fit just right.

Jack Hinks

SUNLIGHT

I always start at the end

Cast a crew

do a table read

plot the stage in tape and buy all the props

before I’ve thought it through

If it isn’t viable

it isn’t worth it

This deep-set desire to plan

without checking if it’s what I want

I keep my heart behind a pair of

steel curtains

to protect it

from drive-by shootings and neighbours

and sunlight

it doesn’t matter

I have a head full of finished drafts

but I just can’t seem to write a first

and I’m so tired and broke and I need to

write a poem that won’t rhyme and finish

a song that won’t sell, and go to the gym,

and cook dinner, and sit in the shower, but

none of it will happen ’cause I can never

just start

and I wonder

if any of it matters

Dedicating my life to

taking record

Working backwards from the end, when

sitting in the park

eyes closed

notebook empty

and feeling the sun carve a smile into my face

would be the greatest protest to living

Surabhi Naik

ACCEPTABLE

You will not infringe upon

my right to my body.

You will not tell me what to wear,

and what to adjust,

and how much to hide.

You will not scrutinize my divine skin

for wedding rings and black beads

because you will not find

ownership on my body.

You will not invade my organs

in the name of religion,

and you will not control

the colors on my forehead.

You don’t get to blame my mother

for not teaching me better.

And you will not drag my father

into your vicious wells of shame.

You do not get to force

and shape me

into your idea of a woman.

What you will do is look

in the mirror and meet your own ghosts,

your loneliest desires,

still waiting at those wrong turns,

shimmering in the haze

of the gorgeousness you gambled away

to be more palatable.

Acceptable.

You will do the hard work

of loving yourself.

Karen Arnold

OLD SCHOOL

There was a moment where it might not have happened, the match not dropped, the punch not thrown. The city burned for days, blue light slicing like a razor blade through the petrol-scented haze.

We took to the streets, grandmothers holding tight to the small hands of granddaughters, tired mothers arm in arm with daughters. Kettled for hours in a city square that had acquired walls of uncollected rubbish, overflowing bins filling the air with corrupted sweetness. They released us as the sun was going down, blood red behind eyeless buildings. Tear gas hung in the warm air of that late July evening, streets still wet with the work of water cannons. One red shoe left behind when its owner was dragged into the back of a black van, a van without windows or number plates.

Radio stations blinked out one by one. Television channels after that. For years, no one had trusted the newspapers to provide anything more useful than lining for a litter tray. When the internet went down for the last time, we swam through the days deaf and blind, feeling our way towards each other in the dark, exchanging whispers and tattered rags of information about who was lost, what had been taken.

In those quiet, shadowy days, one of the grandmothers remembered hand-printing leaflets for school events. Another remembered fingers marked blue by carbon paper. A third found the key to a disused library. Two mothers cradled a green Doc Marten in linked hands to send a daughter over the wall.

Now we spend dark nights breathing life into relics, summoning up a quiet thunder from old machinery, slipping into the grey dawn, printer’s imps with inky fingers. Slinking like alley cats from the shadows, we paste stories to lampposts, information buried in ciphers, news disguised as a plea for a missing child.

We write as an act of resistance.

Roxane Llanque

BOWLER SKY IMILLA

If you walk down the road to Pairumani, you will most likely be passed by Bolivian girls in bowler hats flying on brightly colored skateboards, their long plaits and *pollera* skirts cutting the air with their laughter. *Imillas*! someone will call the young women in Aymara with a smile, and you will wonder.

When did the women wearing the indigenous markers of Bolivia become so assertive and free? What happened between the derided *cholitas* of old wearing them, strong spirits etched by the sharp winds and the higher, crushing class, who were so inextricably bound to the earth, and their daughters, proud riders of the winds, who elicit sun beams with their skating stunts?

*Cholitas* have always been the driving force of Cochabamba. Living contours of the Andes, admired for their untiring work and unmistakable silhouettes, a face of the oppressed Aymara that was acceptably docile to the unlawful rulers. A sight to behold, but just as easily snuffed out whenever the light-skinned felt like playing with their stolen power—which had been their preferred choice since their Conquista. So, you may well ask: how did those London bowlers get to crown the heads of Aymara women? How did skateboards become their flying thrones?

The conquistadores would be happy to tell you that a European merchant once ordered a large shipment of the hats for British rail workers. But the bowlers that arrived were too small, so he peddled them to the native women, telling them they were all the rage among the English upper class. It was the running joke of generations of conquistadores, adding to their collective foot on the people of the Altiplano.

But one day, so distracted by their cruel diversions, they suddenly found themselves eclipsed by a native man named Evo—and he, the first indigenous president of Bolivia, asked the world: who stands taller than the women on whom this country is built? So, the young *cholitas*—who before had shunned the vestments of old, regarding them as perfidiously pretty shackles—decided it was time to jump from the earth and reach for the sky. They bought themselves skateboards, stole the *polleras* of their grandmothers, and took to the cobblestone and blue in secret. Once they collected their first medals and the elder *cholitas* grasped their triumph, they gifted the girls the *polleras* they had liked best—their daughters were returning the proud freedom they thought had been stolen forever.

Men do wonder: how do these bowler hats stay on? How do *imillas* jump this well in skirts? What will it *take* to make them fall? The cruel games of the old world can make no bowler hat, nor its wearer, fold any longer. So, tell me: who stands taller than these women of the Altiplano on their skateboards—bowlers, *polleras*, and plaits reclaiming the contours of the Andes?

Jo Flynn

BAR FIGHT CONJECTURE

Girls will only grow up chasing how to love themselves better,

throwing parties when they make themselves come for the first time.

We’ll only buy a white dress for every long-standing friendship, strap it up to a mast,

and throw confetti made of candour every 28 days or so

when the moon is full. We’ll hold our own doors open and sail through.

We’ll never be last in a room to speak, no dirty knees from

scrambling around looking for our own thoughts on the ground,

dropped and lost because someone else said it louder.

We’ll keep hold of each other’s ideas, tie them onto strings,

and blow them up like balloons to show ourselves they’re important.

Dust yourself down, kid: we might start a bar fight sticking up for

each other, but they started the war.

Smoke clears in tail lights down the street.

I’ve a pocket full of balloons and a ship unmoored.

Sayani De

THE PLAN

The coolness of the knife against Sonali’s fingers soothes her nerves. She holds onto the plastic handle, reassessing its strength. Peering out of the large kitchen window, she takes in the view of the occasional comings and goings of the residents of the apartment building. Prisoners of the pandemic left free for a few moments in the name of essentials; partial lockdown in India is still on. The chugging old scooters, the zooming new motorbikes, the occasional cars. Her ears wait in dread for the booming of an Enfield motorcycle, a luxury in the suburbs. This time it would be different, she swears. She would be ready. The knife has been her companion to bed since the incident. As she forces it through the pumpkin, its sunset-orange flesh splits apart.

The old woman calls from her bedroom. She is asking for tea. Minutes later when Sonali goes to serve her, she is sitting upright. The lady seems to be in one of her teary phases. Sonali takes a deep breath, preparing herself for a rant.

‘What sins have I done to deserve this?’ the woman laments.

Sonali hands over the teacup to her.

‘A year ago, my daughter-in-law used to serve me tea over weekends and now she is gone.’

Sonali flings the curtains apart to the ends of the rod. The old woman turns her face away from the morning light.

‘I don’t understand why women these days get divorced at the drop of the hat! Gautam is an emotional mess. He just doesn’t show it.’

Sonali turns around. The woman is wiping tears with the end of her saree. Sonali brings in the morning medicines for her in a bowl. During her initial days in the house she had forgotten to give a couple of them to the old lady one morning. By afternoon, the lady had cried uncontrollably.

‘She has depression. You can’t mess up her medicines,’ the old man had said with his lips pressed so hard they looked sewn together. It has been a couple of months since then. On good days the old woman watches TV and asks Sonali to join her. They try to guess what the characters on the daily soaps will do next. They discuss the secrets the characters are hiding.

After breakfast Sonali makes the woman’s bed.

‘*Mashi*1, will Gautam *da*2 visit this weekend?’ Sonali starts in a small voice as she bends over to straighten the bedsheet.

‘No, he’ll come next weekend, but why do you ask?’

Sonali thanks her favourite goddess under her breath.

‘We are about to run out of *masoor dal*, *jeera* powder, and bananas in a few days. And we need rat poison; the buggers are back.’

‘Again! It must be the flat downstairs, the filthy family. We get the pests from them every year.’

Sonali can’t remember lice and mice spreading the same way, but she stays mum.

‘I’ll ask him to bring the groceries. He might as well give up his flat and stay here. God knows why he wants to live there.’ The old woman switches on the TV.

Sonali fidgets with the safety pins dangling by the bangle on her left hand.

‘The other night he knocked on my door.’ Sonali’s throat feels dry.

‘Who?’ The old woman furrows her brows.

‘Gautam *da*.’

‘He must have been hungry. You’ve seen how late he works into the night.’

‘Hm.’ Sonali’s tongue feels heavy as a log. Her cheeks burn. The words in her head feel like steam that can’t escape a faulty pressure cooker.

Soon, the rhythm of the day takes over. Floors smell of cleaners and the aroma of *moong dal* tempered with ginger paste fills the house. All smells feel more intense to Sonali since the lockdown. Even cigarettes and cologne from Gautam that night, which made Sonali want to puke. It felt more suffocating than her husband’s bidi breath, a smell she has become used to over the last decade. She had tried to call her husband that night. He hadn’t picked up; probably passed out after a bottle of country liquor. It was Saturday night.

When the lull of afternoon siesta envelopes the house, Sonali locks herself up in her room. She tugs at the black thread of the amulet on her left arm and says a prayer. Her fidgety fingers dial the agency lady who placed her in the house.

‘Anima *di*, how are you?’

‘Good, and you? Things are going well in the house?’

‘Hm. I have a friend who is looking for work as a stay-in help. Do you have anything?’

‘A few people called but from other states. Good salaries too. But no trains, no flights to send a single girl! God knows when this lockdown will end!’ Anima huffs and puffs.

Sonali sighs with a heavy heart. No way to break free. The fear she felt when Gautam tried to push her door open that night was much bigger than that of the deadly virus. She had opened her door thinking he needed something to eat. It was well past her working hours.

‘Can you fix me a cheese sandwich?’ The question seemed innocent.

Sonali hesitated. She looked at the old couple’s bedroom. Its door was closed.

‘Your sandwiches taste so much better than mine. Plus, I’m bored of my own cooking,’ he said, a sly smile spreading in the middle of his well-groomed beard.

The soft sound of the old couple’s snoring played like some faraway drums. She had administered their night-time medicines for depression and high pressure. If an earthquake came, they probably wouldn’t even know. Sonali put on an *odhni*3 across her chest for modesty and headed to the kitchen.

As she melted the gooey cheese on the bread in a *tava*4, she wished the old couple were awake. She wondered why city people took medicines as if they were puffed rice. The elders in her village seemed to do just fine without taking so many of them. They worked in the fields, did housework, chatted with neighbours, and died one day. Everyone had to die one day.

When she served the sandwich, Gautam was sitting on his bed, watching a movie. The hero and heroine were kissing on-screen. Sonali averted her eyes. Gautam fixed his gaze on Sonali as she entered his room. His eyes slowly grazed from her face to her chest. Sonali felt them scanning her body like the x-ray machine that had once scanned her daughter’s broken foot.

‘Do you want to watch the movie? It’s in Hindi.’

‘No, I’m sleepy.’ Heat rose up Sonali’s tiny ears.

She strode past the hallway to her room. Before she could close the door, she felt a push on its other side. Gautam looked at her with red eyes, his broad frame blocking the hallway. Sonali pushed the door shut with all her might and locked it. Her heart raced. She pressed her ear to the door, trying to gauge if Gautam had left.

The alarm for setting the curd goes off, bringing Sonali back to the night of a Gautam-free weekend in the house. After the house goes into slumber, she calls her husband.

‘Where are you?’ she demands.

‘What is it to you?’

‘Did you pay this month’s dues for the motorbike?’

‘I lost my school drop-off job, remember?’

‘You’re still driving for doctor *babu*5. That salary is enough to pay the dues.’

‘Are you mad? How am I to pay for my food and room?’

‘Or your alcohol,’ Sonali says through clenched teeth.

‘Don’t talk rubbish.’

‘You haven’t sent a single rupee home for Munni. Your mother is complaining. The dues for the motorbike are also on me. I can’t pay for everything.’

‘Can’t you arrange for some advance cash this month from the old woman? I promise I’ll pay next month.’ Her husband’s voice mellows.

She knows the cycle. He is trying to sweet-talk her into more debt.

‘Do you remember Khushi?’

‘From the slum?’

‘Yes. She lived two houses from us when we first came to Kolkata.’

‘What about her?’

‘Do you know how she is doing?’

‘No, haven’t heard much since that incident. Heard those guys bribed the police and threatened her parents.’

‘Oh.’

‘It was her fault anyway. Why lure men and then blame them for approaching?’

‘I saw her the day of the incident. Blood trickled down her legs below her school skirt.’

‘Shameless girl! Young enough to wear a skirt to school but going out with men! The girls these days!’

‘She was fifteen. It was her girlfriend’s brother and his friends.’

‘No one is going to marry her now, at least in this area. Blackened the family name . . . It’s better to die.’

‘Like how Kamala *didi*6 poisoned herself after her father-in-law raped her?’ Sonali hisses over the phone.

‘Do you have no work but to bring up random things? Why do you ask about Khushi all of a sudden?’

‘Nothing, just remembering her.’

Sonali disconnects the call. The walls of her seven-by-nine servant room seem to close in on her. She looks at her daughter’s photo stashed in the sole bag that she brought here. Placing it on her tear-stained pillow, she curls up on her single folding cot. The exhaustion of the day sweeps her off to sleep.

Days pass with news channels broadcasting pandemic-related deaths, people losing their jobs, and more upcoming lockdowns. Sometimes Sonali feels like talking to the TV. The world seems upside down to her. The old woman says it is how God willed it, but Sonali’s instincts urge her to fight back.

On a night when she feels like she is sitting at the bottom of a well, she distracts herself by watching videos on her phone. A monkey doing antics in a shoebox amuses her. She barely registers the faint knock on her door. She opens her door still laughing at the monkey. A hand thrusts in and covers her mouth while the other grabs her waist. Gautam forces his way into the room and closes the door with his back. She is too shocked to respond.

When did he get in? He must have come in minutes ago using his key. The ceiling is spinning. No, it is the fan. As her head knocks against the wall, her mind springs back. She doesn’t resist him. She encircles her arms around his neck. It seems to excite him. He grabs her thigh. As her hands meet behind his back, she snaps open the big safety pin on her bangle and thrusts it into the back of his neck with all the strength she can muster.

His screams are sure to reach the old couple’s room. He recoils. She grabs the moment to free herself and throws the door of her room open. In a few seconds the door to the old couple’s room opens, but by that time Gautam has escaped to his room, where the TV is on. Sonali stands in the hallway. The old man comes out, looking bewildered. He briefly glances at Sonali, then fixes his gaze on his son.

‘Gautam, you?’

‘Sorry, did I wake you up? I was watching the highlights of last year’s match. They just missed an easy ball.’

Sonali sees the old man is ready to go back to bed. It is a dead end. She is just a maid who can’t keep to her room.

‘You should go to sleep, Sonali.’ The old man’s voice trails off as he shuts his door behind him.

Sleep eludes her for the remainder of the night. Every few minutes she struggles to breathe as she thinks of what could have happened to her. As dawn breaks in with its aura of clarity, she hears the old lady’s footsteps going to the bathroom. Nothing bad ever happens in the morning, she assures herself. She goes to the kitchen.

A green nylon bag filled to the brim with groceries sits on the kitchen slab. It is from the list she made last week. She starts boiling water on the stove. Everybody, including Gautam, would soon demand tea. As she empties the *masoor dal* into its designated glass jar, she thinks of the pretend-nothing-happened act she would have to play all day. Below the bananas, a black-and-green packet catches her eyes. The rat poison she put on the grocery list sits in front of her.

As bubbles form all over the water’s surface, she thinks of an old story her grandmother had once told her. It was about a queen of olden times who licked poison concealed in her finger ring to spare herself from rape and misery when invaders defeated the king. Different times. She touches the safety pins on her bangles like a warrior caressing his sword. Last night should teach Gautam not to mess with her, but she needs a plan if the worst happens. She looks at the rat poison and gauges how much sugar and cardamom could conceal its taste in a sugary cup of masala tea. Her gaze drifts from the poison and fixates on an unaware Gautam. The blazing fire of the stove reflects in her eyes.

GLOSSARY

1 *Mashi*: aunty

2 *Da*: older brother, used as a common way to address older males

3 *Odhni*: long scarf

4 *Tava*: frying pan

5 *Babu*: respectful way to address men

6 *Didi*: elder sister, used to address any elder female

Reyzl Grace

GET RID OF CROWS’ FEET, FINE LINES, AND WRINKLES

My dear, you misunderstand crows.

Everyone does in English –

carrion feeders,

portents of doom –

transpositions of names

given to Gaels reduced to squatting,

starving on their own islands

and always at risk

of murdering a landlord if he dared

show his face. To a man

like that, it must certainly seem

that crows and their kinfolk

are drawn to death.

But you should know better.

I say that not as a judgement,

but as a promise.

Crows flock to the dead

because they flock to power.

The early Christians understood

this, saw the allegory

of their stigmata – a hole

through each palm

and one through both feet –

in a talon-press at the left

eye for Macha, at the right

for Badb, at the third

for the Phantom Queen.

For this, they made us bishops

once, until, re-reading Genesis,

they found us cousins to the raven,

who reports to no man.

I have brought a man’s child

into the world and then thrown off

the man who kept me closest –

chained. A fair trade – a drink

of milk for the healing of wounds.

What you see at my eyes

aren’t wounds, but a promise.

Did you know? The Gaels

in Éire don’t say ‘from dawn ’til dusk’,

but ‘ó dhubh go dubh’ – from black to black

– and everything is in between.

So keep your creams, *wean*,

but give me a good kohl and a bright shadow

and I’ll show you

how colourful a crow can be.

M. J. Gomez

LOVE POEM IN SPITE OF ELECTRON REPULSION

For Asiye

Despite everything,

I am only trying to live tremendously.

I have given you the world

and nothing else. The heavens, unseen,

at once mourn and taunt

our distance—

the very notion of it.

Intangible borders consume

then vanish

into the grins of laughing men.

Once, in a dream, I held you,

and even the trees smiled.

Even this is transgression.

Despite the border between every atom,

touch registers

as the shortest longing.

Despite the border, we touch.

Ours is the noble and eternal work

of revolution.

David Milley

NO “HEAVEN OF ANIMALS”

Coming home that August night, we fought.

Too long at the bars, we’d drunk too much.

I don’t remember what the fight was about—

something you said, no doubt, set me off.

I shouted at you. You shot back. I flounced off

to the far end of the train, set my back to yours.

Three men sitting nearby called you out

for everyone to hear, all those names they use.

I turned and saw you pull your hat down.

They pointed at you and laughed. They stood,

loomed above you. I jumped into the aisle.

The train reached our station and stopped.

You made for the west platform door; I went east,

and we both darted downstairs. Three fag-bashers

followed you, menaced you. Fists up, you swore,

offered to fight them all, there—on that stair.

On station level, they got set to pounce—

then saw me charging from the other side.

Skittering, they jumped the stile and ran.

You chased until they were gone.

Weary, you returned to the shelter of my arms.

Sometimes the lion, sure of its meal,

misjudges the prey and loosens its grip.

The snake strikes at the claw and wins free.

Noémi Kiss-Deáki

THE REVENGE

1

Margaret lies and listens to the creaking of the hammock. Usually, it is a comforting sound, her favourite sound in the summer.

But not now. Now the creaking of the hammock, the hiss of the wind through the trees, and the lonely coo of a dove nearby merely act as amplifiers of her loneliness.

Unwantedness.

Unwanted, unwelcome, sent out.

She is always sent out when Mr Morgenson comes to visit.

If she had a watch, she could at least count the minutes. But she doesn’t have a watch. The only ones who have private watches in the household are her father, who is never at home, and the nurse who comes to visit once a week.

Her father’s watch is golden, the size of her palm, with its own chain. It hides in the pocket of his waistcoat. He takes it out sometimes and clicks it open with an accustomed motion. He looks at, clicks it shut, and puts it back again. She has never been allowed to touch it.

The nurse’s watch is small and pretty, like the nurse herself, and hangs in the open, pinned on the bosom of her neat apron.

She comes once a week to take the weight and measurements of Matilda, the baby sister.

Each time, the nurse compliments Matilda on her fatness and plumpness and the fact that she has grown so much since last time.

It is very predictable. It is the same thing each time, so Margaret doesn’t understand why she has to come each week.

As if Matilda wouldn’t be growing and developing if the nurse didn’t come to make sure of it through check-ups and written-down notes.

But she does. Matilda grows each day, her chins turning rounder and her thighs more creased each week that goes by. And everyone loves her.

Everyone except Margaret.

2

She draws a great sigh in the hammock. She has to wait for her mother to call her back inside. By then, Mr Morgenson is in his coat and hat again. Sometimes he is already in his black car, jerking the engine to life. And then he is off, and Margaret is allowed to take up space in her home again.

3

He is a soapmaker. Her mother is not even that interested in soaps, so one might wonder what business a soapmaker has coming to their house all the time.

But Margaret supposes his hands are clean and nice-smelling and that is one thing that sets him apart.

Her mother likes clean and nice-smelling things.

She has always liked everything that is clean and nice-smelling.

4

When Margaret gets bored, she enjoys upsetting middle-aged men.

Perhaps because that is the only way to catch their attention.

Her father is away more often than not, so the attention of men who could be her father will have to do.

Because it is like this:

The neglected soul of a child craves any attention it can get.

5

One object of attention is the family doctor. He usually comes to conclude that her mother has a migraine and prescribes pills to treat it, a different brand each time.

The pills never help.

Once, he was on his way but was caught up in the meanderings of an adult conversation not coming to a close yet with her mother; the trap of small talk.

His bag was waiting for him in the parlour.

Margaret was bored out of her mind and in a disruptive mood that day.

She went inside the parlour.

She stared at the unattended bag. The black leather stared back sternly.

She went over to it and clicked it open. It was easy. There was nothing the leather could do about it.

She saw a notebook and a pen. Beneath it, a stethoscope and several other funny-looking instruments she didn’t recognize. A pair of rubber gloves. Something that looked like a small wooden spatula, almost like a spoon used for ice cream.

Did the doctor prescribe ice cream to his patients?

Did he bring that spoon to feed it to them?

She supposed ice cream was nice to have while sick. Much better than the ghastly thyme tea the maids forced her to drink each time she had a cold.

She took out the stethoscope. She put it around her neck and let it rest there, like a limp snake.

She put on the rubber gloves next. They were too big for her, so their tips hung like empty sausage skins.

She got hold of a cold metal instrument that looked like a duck with a long beak. She noticed there was a screw on it. She screwed it and the duck opened its mouth, as if hungry.

A change in the air. She realized the background murmur of adult conversation had stopped.

The doctor stood in the door.

He stared at her and she stared back.

She spoke: ‘I just wanted to check it out. I just wanted to check out the contents of your bag.’

He was still silent, but then he raised his voice: ‘Mrs Evans!’

It was time to be disciplined and punished for a transgression, so he called her mother.

Her mother came, her eyes full of questions. When she saw Margaret, she stared too. Then she hissed her name, walked over, and gave her a big slap on the face.

Margaret let her head sink after that, her rubber-gloved hands hanging by her sides, the instrument that looked like a duck held in her left hand, her cheek burning.

‘I am terribly sorry, Doctor Babcock, I don’t know what has gotten into her. Margaret, you give those things back to Doctor Babcock at once!’

Margaret took off the stethoscope. She took off the gloves. She put the duck back, its mouth open. As the doctor came closer, she clicked the bag shut. She then gripped its handle, lifted it, and ran outside with it.

Her mother and Doctor Babcock were so astonished, it gave her ample time to get up on her favourite tree, bag in hand. She sat there on the most comfortable branch, balancing the bag in her lap, and watched her mother and the doctor come out of the house.

Her mother ran with the quick but short steps necessitated by too-tight female clothing, one hand clutching her skirt so as not to stumble over it. The doctor was faster, his trousers and maleness allowing him a bigger stride and thus quicker progress. He came to the tree first, then stopped and waited for her mother.

He seemed to have the utmost respect for the fact that Margaret was her mother’s child, not his.

So, her mother’s to rein in, chastise, and contain.

When her mother finally arrived, her face was flushed, her breathing quick, although she did everything to seem more composed than she was.

‘Margaret,’ she said, ‘come down from there at once.’

‘I want an apology,’ Margaret said, and before the adults could give their opinion, she went on: ‘I want an apology from Doctor Babcock for calling my mother to the room, knowing she would chastise me. And I want an apology from my mother for inflicting pain upon my body.’

They were silent.

Her mother said: ‘Margaret. Give Doctor Babcock his bag back.’

‘I have no wish to, not until you’ve apologized. Both of you.’

In the end, Gordon, one of the gardeners, was called there with a ladder. He climbed up on it. He pried her hands off the bag. He lifted it away and carefully gave it back to the doctor. He then climbed up and lifted Margaret away too, off from the branch.

She tried to hold on to the branch, but he was bigger and stronger.

6

The second object of attention is Mr Eckhaus, the bird-catcher.

He puts out traps that will kill the small birds of the forest when they go under it.

He has a big torch that he stuns the round pheasants with at night, thus allowing him to catch them.

He always has one or two feathers stuck to his coat and a feather stuck in his hat on purpose.

He has a moustache and there is something featherlike about that too.

He always hums a little tune when he visits.

Once he showed Margaret how to imitate an owl to lure out birds that are scared of owls.

She wasn’t good at catching his attention. If she sometimes managed to hide his nets or ropes or baskets while he talked to her mother, he would just laugh it off and ruffle her hair, his moustache curling in a benevolent smile. He would then go searching for his tools. He would find them each time.

Sometimes Margaret wants to be a bird because perhaps then he would be interested in catching her too.

7

The third object of attention is the taxidermist. His name is Mr Sloley. He delivers the still and stiff ermines, frozen in lifelike positions, glass eyes staring, that her mother likes to display in the salon.

There is no end to the ermines. He brings them in wooden boxes, carefully wrapped.

When they are unwrapped and displayed, they fill several shelves.

She once hid his shoes. He and the servants had to search for them for a whole hour.

Margaret sat and waited on the stairs. When an hour had gone by, she finally said: “By the shed.”

They went out there. They found the shoes. They were nice shoes. Cream-coloured with brown middles. But now some dirt had gotten on them because of the soil by the shed. She had put them under the gardening tools.

Once returned, Mr Sloley and the servants stared at her.

Then, Mr Sloley raised his voice: ‘Mrs Evans!’

8

The baby sister is never slapped or chastised. She is only spoken to with soft and sweet words, voices rising high.

Everyone’s voice rises high when they speak to her.

They kiss her and cuddle with her.

They love her, even when screaming and unable to keep shit and piss back, releasing it anywhere, anytime.

It is inconceivable.

9

The fourth object of attention is Mr Biel, the child psychologist.

Her mother is an artist and draws the pictures the child psychologist standardizes and uses in his psychological tests with children.

The pictures are simple. Laughable.

A ball. A tree. A cat.

A hat.

A woman pushing a baby in a stroller.

Two girls talking.

One boy giving a glass of water to another boy.

A group of people laughing.

An angry boy, his brows furrowed, his arms crossed.

Two girls reading.

Margaret doesn’t get why anyone likes them or why anyone would want to use them in their work.

Mr Biel says Margaret is gifted. Gifted but difficult.

He impresses on the mother how important it is to get rid of her difficulty.

He is full of good ideas and tips.

He makes sure to give her mother a new good idea or tip each time he visits.

He says Margaret is to stand in a corner with her back to the others when she has done something bad. The shame and isolation will give her pause for thought.

Pause for thoughts concerned with how she will behave better next time to avoid this kind of consequence.

But Margaret is not ashamed. She is just angry. And she won’t stay in the corner. No one can make her stay in that corner. When they try to make her stay there with slaps, she runs out in the garden. Her mother and the female servants give up then. They don’t want to go out chasing her in impractical skirts unless they absolutely have to.

Mr Biel tells her mother to ignore Margaret when she wants something. He also tells her to withhold embraces and kisses until Margaret behaves better.

He doesn’t need to tell her that. Margaret’s mother already does that naturally.

He tells her mother to not go to Margaret if she wakes up and screams in the night. He also tells her to instruct the maids to not go to her if she screams in the night.

The withholding of attention and affection will make her motivated to behave better, to be worthy of attention and affection again. Her loneliness in the night will make her understand that modern humans can only depend on themselves and that God is dead.

But the withholding of attention and affection only makes Margaret sad and hurting. Resentful.

And her loneliness in the night only makes her frightened and devastated.

She wants to depend on others because she is a child.

And she wants to believe God is still out there, somewhere.

10

The next time Mr Biel visits, Margaret hides his pen. It is a green fountain pen. She finds it in his coat pocket. She finds his wallet there too. When she has hidden his pen, she goes back to his coat.

She finds the wallet again and opens it. She goes through its contents. Several banknotes. She pockets them. There is a photo of a blonde woman she picks out and lets fall down on the floor, like a leaf. And she finds something else too.

A thin package, like a case, with even smaller and thinner packages inside. They are easy to break open. She pulls rubber thingies out of them, thin and sticky. Like the mouths of balloons. Touching them is like touching the inflated surface of a bubble of chewing gum.

She takes them to the tap in the bathroom and fills them with water. They look like grotesque sausages then. She then lets them land on the floor, the water exploding out of them.

It is spectacular.

11

Mr Biel, the child psychologist, turns peony red in the face once he discovers it. The bathroom is not too far from the hall. The servants come there too, and her mother.

Several of the servants have to suppress smiles. They can’t find it in themselves to manage the situation. Not yet. They want to see how it unfolds.

Her mother hisses: ‘*Margaret!*’

Mr Biel turns to her mother. He seems to have difficulty breathing. There is a tremor in his voice when he speaks: ‘This is not normal. This is not normal behaviour. She is abnormal.’

12

The word *abnormal* gets thrown around some more. The child psychologist wants her evaluated.

He says Margaret is starting to exhibit antisocial and psychopathic tendencies. She seems to be drawn to and take pleasure in anything taboo.

Her mother tells him of the incident with Doctor Babcock’s bag.

Mr Biel nods. His face is grave and he says that all of it is very concerning and falls in line with the traits and patterns.

Margaret exhibits several concerning traits and patterns.

Mr Biel goes on and on about traits and patterns.

He asks Margaret’s mother if Margaret has ever tortured animals or insects or if she has ever touched herself inappropriately in front of others.

He doesn’t mention the word *gifted* anymore.

Luckily, that is one of the evenings when her father’s work allows him to come home.

During dinner, her mother tells him all about Margaret’s misbehaviour and what Mr Biel had said that day.

Her father chokes on his evening tea.

He says there is nothing wrong with his daughter. He says Mr Biel is an incompetent idiot who talks bullshit. He says Margaret would behave better if her mother looked after her better. He criticizes the mother and says that she is too inconsistent. She needs to be more consistent. Margaret just needs to learn right and wrong. If only her mother would be firm and consistent, there would be no problems.

The mother bursts out crying. She then starts yelling. She yells that he has no idea how hard it is to be a mother. She yells that she has only just stopped bleeding after Matilda’s birth.

‘Nine weeks!’ she shouts. ‘Do you know what it feels like to be bleeding for nine weeks?!’

She says Matilda wakes up six times a night to get nursed. She is exhausted.

She says she can only think of the baby. She says it is exhausting to have to discipline an older child all the time who should know better. She adds that Doctor Babcock has said that she islow in iron. She should take her supplements, eat iron-rich food, and rest a lot.

But she can’t rest! She can never rest!!!

Margaret’s father turns quiet and sullen.

He doesn’t respond to any of it. When Margaret’s mother has resorted to crying again while nursing Matilda, the father speaks.

‘I don’t want Mr Biel to concern himself with our daughter ever again. If he does, I will throw him out of this house.’

Margaret comes out of the shadows.

She says: ‘My mother has no time for me. But she has lots of time for Mr Morgenson. Lots and lots. And he has brown eyes, just like Matilda.’

No one else has brown eyes in the family, so Matilda is a little peculiar that way.

No one else has ever pointed out that Mr Morgenson is the only one in close proximity who has brown eyes too. Perhaps people didn’t notice and needed it pointed out for them.

Now Margaret has pointed it out.

Devon Webb

I HAVE ENEMIES

I have enemies

I’m far too opinionated to not upset anybody

I’m far too powerful to not

break a few plates

I wish I could be

one of those entirely zen women

who smile & forget their haters

but I have their names in my teeth like cavities

I am the dripping masochism

of pain being a main motivation

There is a graveyard in my throat

of lost friends & lovers & communities

I cannot mourn in any other way but eulogy

there is every goodbye that was torn from me before it was ready

playing on broken loop like a song I cannot end

only try & twist into some sort of harmony

I make noise about my tragedy

but they cover their ears cos they don’t like the sound

I’m sorry our genres are not the same

I’m sorry if my art doesn’t inspire your empathy

I’m sorry if my truth is ugly

(no, I am not sorry)

Men critique me, try to diminish me

but I ask myself every day:

do I want fame or stagnancy

do I want the status quo or expanded consciousness

do I want to be alone & unbothered or forge a future in the flames

Make me martyr if you will

I have endured worse than your weaponised stones

I am solid diamond in your glass house

I am the symphony drowning out your silence

Oh, I am such a myriad of things

but if all you see in my facets is reflection

then for your own sake

for our collective evolution

I hope you can hold your own gaze.

Paul Forster

MIRADOR/SPLINTER

Angelo claps his hands and sings alongside Rodolfo’s guitar, and when he stamps his battered dress shoes down, a splinter punctures the ball of his foot. He grimaces, not with pain but with the anguish of the song. He needs to look the part for this performance. His body’s percussion punctuates his voice. The soldier leans against the wine-stained brick wall to the left of the bar, despite the place being virtually empty. Their eyes lock.

‘I want the heat from you for my body,

We both have fire running through us,

Like water, oh, like water, like water’

Angelo pictures every curve of the soldier’s body beneath his uniform. A body he’s known since they’d scrabbled around snotty-nosed in the dirt with the chickens. The soldier’s mother knew no word for *foreigner* in her dialect, so only her son played with Angelo, the Moroccan whore’s half-breed. A body he’s explored and cherished and worshipped. A body he was willing to die for, to kill for, to live for.

Two nuns drag their black habits and squat glasses of vermouth to the front of the stage and heave their ample bottoms onto sagging wicker-seated stools. Angelo’s eyes flicker to them momentarily in welcome and deference before returning to the soldier.

He stamps to accompany the guitar and drives the splinter deeper. The pain, mixed with the sorrow and desire of the song, makes his voice crack from a bellow into a wail. Later tonight, he’ll dig it out and smother the wound with honey. At the end of the song, his eyes flutter closed while he girds his heart, then stands to stomp and dance and spin.

Never again will the soldier attend carnival with Angelo and Rodolfo and entertain the masses in the cathedral square by wearing his mother’s carmine flamenco dress. Never again will they quarrel in the street for passers-by to gawp at, not now that he’d taken up arms. Never again will Angelo speak the soldier’s name, to his face or to anyone; he is being forgotten.

Angelo opens his eyes to stifled applause from the nuns and a wide, knowing smile from the soldier. A gaggle of rowdy fishermen drag in their salty-sweet stink before settling behind the nuns with overflowing cups of Barbazul, making their hands look bloody. Rodolfo plucks a few melancholic strings, and Angelo claps softly. The fishermen join in with their own claps and thigh slaps.

‘Because I can’t stand it anymore,

I don’t want to live like this,

Because I can’t live without her.’

Angelo’s eyes burn into the soldier. This evening, Angelo goes through the motions, plays old favourites in the local tongue, and pays lip service to the soldier. Flamenco is a masquerade, a despairing filibuster before the final divisive act of contrition. Folklore suggests there are more poets in Cadiz than anywhere in Spain. Their proximity to Africa and to the New World makes them wistful, romantic, and covetous. So they write, they sing, and they pine for the unknown.

Pedro, the port union leader, arrives helmed by his two burly sons and gives Angelo an askance look. He sits alone at the table in front of the soldier until his sons bring him brandy, their heads nodding almost imperceptibly to the song.

‘Don’t come repenting, or begging forgiveness,

I don’t want your love, it’s erased from my mind,

I no longer want your lips . . .’

Rodolfo ekes one note out with some clever fret work, and Angelo clicks his fingers so they elicit a simple whisper, like a dove’s wings taking flight. The choice of song has its intended effect: the soldier’s mask slips to reveal the briefest glimpse of his real, repugnant face. A face of wanton cruelty. A face of unabashed infallibility. The face of the enemy. He blinks and reaffixes the mask to match the dejection of the song.

The cadence of the performance slows, and the pain subsides, but the splinter still nags like an irritable spouse. Angelo dances while Rodolfo strums quickly to conclude the song with a swirling flourish and coaxes enthusiastic applause from the slowly growing crowd. Chipped glasses of sherry are brought to Angelo and Rodolfo by the bar’s patron, Abrahán. Everyone knows his name is actually Ibrihim, but they keep up the pretence.

They come off the stage for a break. Angelo needs to piss, but he also needs to avoid the corrosive effluent on the latrine floor lest his splintered foot get infected. A stack of beer mats catches his eye. He and Rodolfo sit on the back step, surrounded by barrels and crates, and smoke thin, hand-rolled cigarettes while Angelo lines his shoe with the beer mats.

When Rodolfo leaves for the latrine, the soldier appears behind Angelo. He sits on the step next to him, cups his cheek in his palm, and kisses him with dry, full lips. Angelo can’t resist the parting glance of his penitent tongue against the soldier’s, a quick lustful nibble of his neck, or the guilty feel of his broad back as they entwine.

Rodolfo coughs behind them. Time to go back on.

The bar is full and all seats are taken, with more revellers standing in the eaves, but the soldier reclaims his spot with ease. Angelo emotes through wordless chants while Rodolfo plays the bars to an ancient song. It may have once had lyrics, but over time the language of origin died and only the melody remained, handed down by generations of Gypsies and flamenco performers. Angelo learned flamenco in the evenings, his muscles weak from labouring on the farm. He had only one golden hour to learn from Bene, his mother’s boyfriend, because after that, Bene’s drunk and lecherous hands reached out, not caring who or what they found.

The wordless melody catches in Angelo’s throat, and, instead of breaking the flow, it changes the pitch to a tormented shriek. The crowd claps and stomps along and sends him and Rodolfo into a pummelling crescendo before Rodolfo silences and Angelo’s voice peters out. The crowd quiets, and, for a beat, they don’t react, until Angelo claps thunderously, allowing them to show their appreciation for the well-loved, supposed paean.

Hesitance warps time as Angelo prepares to sing the next song, the song he’s written for this moment, for the soldier’s leaving party. The song he wrote for one purpose and will never perform again. Only murmurs fill the silence. The dance isn’t collective tonight; not even the fishermen’s good-natured goading provokes a reaction. The splinter aches, and Angelo stamps his feet with heft. He tries to stomp the pain away. He pairs the smack of his shoes on the wooden stage with claps that reverberate around the room and land last on the soldier. Rodolfo’s guitar twangs, and Angelo opens his mouth, eyes boring into the soldier’s and fracturing brittle nostalgia.

‘My world crumbled the night you left,

The cause was your own, not ours to share,

Oh don’t betray me, boy.’

His voice wavers on each syllable and elongates their delivery, so the story becomes distorted and dispassionate. The soldier’s face appears rapt and content. He is drinking in the drama of his hometown, the voice of his love, and the warmth of the bar before he leaves to fight. Pedro raises his eyebrows in question, and Angelo slices the air with his hand in response, before slapping his thigh to create a beat that hides the signal.

‘Your world crumbled the night you left,

Your cause was not just, you didn’t want to share,

Oh don’t betray us, boy.’

The union leader’s two burly sons stand, and Angelo closes his eyes. He’s imagined this moment more times than he can count. The Republican resistance planned it when the soldier breezed back into town. He can’t be allowed to leave again and fight against his brethren for the Nationalists. Regardless of what he believes to be right, he is wrong. In his mind’s eye, Angelo can see one of Pedro’s sons grab the soldier’s wrists. In one deft movement, the other son moves behind the soldier, weaves a wire round his neck, knots the garrotte with gloved hands, and pushes a knee into the soldier’s back. The soldier’s face turns a panicked puce. He stomps his feet, and Angelo matches his frenzied footwork. The soldier kicks out at the other son’s crotch, and he staggers back, but it’s too late.

‘You can’t leave again and crush our dreams,

Our cause is just, I wish you wanted to share,

Oh we have betrayed you, boy!’

The soldier goes limp, and Pedro’s son catches him under the arms like an inebriated friend. The other son walks gingerly forwards, holding his privates, and retrieves the wire from the soldier’s mottled neck. Rodolfo plucks his last string, but Angelo continues the performance alone. He claps, stomps, clicks, and sings to create a spectacle not to be repeated or forgotten by those present. The splinter is now so deep in his foot he may never retrieve it.

The nuns stand, produce a flask, and douse holy water on the soldier as they leave. The fishermen depart and turn left out of the bar, towards the harbour. Pedro’s sons wrap the soldier’s arms round their necks and take him from the bar. Anyone would guess he’s dead drunk. He’ll be tossed off a fishing boat before the sun passes the horizon, weighted down by rocks from the beach.

When Angelo finally opens his eyes, he uses the sweat from his brow to sweep his thick, curly hair and tries to steady his breath. All he’s imagined has come to pass. Rodolfo sits beside him with a cigarette, and Abrahán sweeps the floor. The bar is otherwise empty. His foot throbs. Each beat of his pulse aches as the splinter is driven further into his heart.

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Alex Cregan** is a transgender and neurodivergent writer/poet from Ireland. His work previously featured in Belfast Pride’s *Poetry with Pride 2023* edition and *The Paperclip Vol III*. He has also co-moderated the *Celtic Renaissance Art Zine*, raising money for TENI. Alex’s work is inspired greatly by the many intersections of his identity and the conflict (both internal and external) that entails.

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**Alisa Lindfield-Pratt** is a queer writer of short fiction and poetry. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in a Tim Saunders Publications anthology, a collaborative issue of *The Minison Project* and *Moss Puppy Magazine*, *the minison zine*, *The Expressionist Literary Magazine*, *Scarlet Dragonfly Journal*, *Perfumed Pages Magazine*, *ionosphere*, *TMP Magazine*, and *The Sapphic Scoop*. By day, Alisa works as a research administrator. She lives in Australia with her partner, dog, and two kids.

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**Alshaad Kara** is a Mauritian poet who writes from his heart. He won the 2023 Zheng Nian Cup Literary Award Third Prize. His latest poems were published in *The BeZine*, *Men Matters Online Journal*, and *OPA Anthology of Poetry 2023*.

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**A. W. Earl** is a writer, storyteller, and poet. They learned their craft on both the DIY punk poetry scene of the Medway towns and the more formal atmosphere on the University of East Anglia’s literature and creative writing course. Their work is often concerned with gender, deviant bodies, and folklore. Their debut novel *Time’s Fool* was published by Unbound in 2018.

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**Charlotte Newbury** is a queer poet from South East England. She likes witchcraft, ecofeminism, and spider plants. You can find her (and her most recent publications) on X, where she also enjoys making writer friends. Come say hi!

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**Christina Hennemann** is a poet and prose writer based in Ireland. She’s a recipient of the Irish Arts Council’s Agility Award ’23 and she was longlisted in the National Poetry Competition. Her work is forthcoming and appears in *Poetry Wales*, *The Iowa Review*, *Skylight 47*, *The Moth*, *York Literary Review*, *fifth wheel anthology*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *MORIA*, and elsewhere.

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**D. Rudd-Mitchell** is an occasional poet and less frequent author; a short run of his first novella *P* was published by the Plastic Brain Press in 2021.

**Dana Knott** (she/her) has recent publications in *Dust Poetry Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Musing Publications*. She enjoys the company of her favourite two humans and three cats. Dana works as a library director in Ohio and is the editor of *tiny wren lit*, which publishes micro-poetry.

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**David Milley** has been writing verse and prose since the 1970s, while working as a technical editor and web applications developer. His work appears in *Bay Windows*, *RFD*, *Friends Journal*, *Capsule Stories*, and *Feral*. Retired now, David lives in southern New Jersey with his husband and partner of forty-seven years, Warren Davy, who has made his living as a farmer, woodcutter, nurseryman, auctioneer, beekeeper, and cook. These days, Warren tends his garden and keeps honeybees. David walks and writes.

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**Devon Webb** is a twenty-five-year-old writer based in Aotearoa. She writes full-time, exploring themes of femininity, intimacy, and vulnerability. She shares her poetry online, through live performance, and has been widely published both locally and internationally. She is the two-time Wellington Slam Poetry Champion and is currently working on the final edits of her debut novel *The Acid Mile*. Her work can be found on Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok.

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**Emma Wells** is a mother and English teacher. She has poetry published with various literary journals and magazines. She enjoys writing flash fiction and short stories. Emma won the Wingless Dreamer’s Bird Poetry Contest of 2022 and her short story ‘Virginia Creeper’ was selected as a winning title by WriteFluence Singles Contest in 2021. Recently, she won *Dipity Literary Magazine*’s 2024 Best of the Net nominations for fiction with her short story ‘The Voice of a Wildling’.

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**Jack Hinks** is a poet, musician, and photographer. Known for his introspective style, cross-media experimentation, and collaborative work with hundreds of poets in the Scottish spoken word scene, Jack is a seasoned performer and writer. His work can be found in the I Am Loud Productions, *NaPoWriMo Scrapbook*, and at various live nights in Scotland. Jack is currently working on his first collection.

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**James J. Siegel** is a Pushcart-nominated poet and author of the poetry collections *The God of San Francisco* (Sibling Rivalry Press) and *How Ghosts Travel*, which was a finalist for an Ohioana Library Award. He is also the host and curator of the monthly Literary Speakeasy show at Martuni’s piano bar in San Francisco, which recently celebrated eight years. His poems have been featured in several journals and anthologies, including the *Cortland Review*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *HIV Here & Now*, *Foglifter*, *Divining Divas: 100 Gay Men On Their Muses*, and more.

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**Jo Flynn** has just won a 2023 Northern Writers’ Award for her current work in progress. Her debut poetry pamphlet *Swallowing Sand* was published after winning the Roy Fisher Prize for poetry endorsed by the Poet Laureate. She has since been featured in the National Poetry Library in London for short-form poetry, shortlisted for the Jane Martin Poetry Prize, has performed internationally, and has been published by the likes of *Dear Damsels*, *The Signal House Edition*, and *Myth and Lore*. Jo just hopes to make sense of the world with words. And dogs.

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**Kaci O’Meara** is a poet from Glasgow city. She has been writing since the age of ten, and her passion for writing led her to discover her true talent for poetry, which has become her primary medium. Kaci’s main goals are to have her work published in multiple publications and to write and publish many collections. In August 2023, she entered her second year of college, studying creative writing at a HNC level, after which she plans to self-publish her first poetry collection and create poetry-themed zines.

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**Karen Arnold** is a writer and psychotherapist. She came to writing later in life but is busy making up for lost time. She is fascinated by the way we use narratives and storytelling to make sense of our human experiences. She won the Mslexia Prize for flash fiction in 2022 and has works in *The Waxed Lemon*, *The Martello*, and *Roi Fainéant,* amongst others.

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**Lewis Brown** is a Newcastle-based poet and performer who is fascinated by aromantic love and queerplatonic relationships. He is bound to unlock the deepest secrets of platonic intimacy any day now and will report back when he has found the answer.

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**M. J. Gomez** is the author of *Love Letters from a Burning Planet* (Variant Literature, 2023). His poems appear in *Surging Tide*, *The* *Lunar Journal*, *Lavender Bones Magazine*, *The* *Dawn Review*, and elsewhere.

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**Noémi Kiss-Deáki** is an emergingwriter living on the Åland Islands. She was born in 1991 and studied at Uppsala University. She has an academic background in art history, literature, the history of ideas, and library and information science. Nowadays, she works as a medical secretary and writes fiction in the evenings. Her debut historical novel, *Mary and the Rabbit Dream*,is coming out in July 2024 with Galley Beggar Press.

**Odi Welter** is a queer, neurodivergent author currently studying film and creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. They have been featured in multiple literary magazines such as *Furrow Magazine*, *Yellow Arrow Vignette*, *Broken Antler Magazine*, and *voidspace zine*. When not writing, they are indulging in their borderline unhealthy obsessions with fairy tales, marine life, superheroes, and botany.

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**Oenone Thomas** was brought up in South Wales and southern Spain. She is a writer and chocolate maker living in the south of England. She is in her second year of the Writing Poetry MA at Poetry School, London.

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**Olga Dermott-Bond** is originally from Northern Ireland and lives in Warwickshire, where she works as a secondary school teacher. She has published two pamphlets: *apple, fallen* (Against the Grain Press, 2020) and *A Sky Full of Strange Specimens* (Nine Pens Press, 2021). Her first full collection, *Frieze*, was published by Nine Arches Press in October 2023. She has won a number of poetry competitions including the BBC Proms, Welshpool, and Poetry on Loan. She is currently a managing editor for Irish poetry journal *Dodging the Rain*.

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**Paul Forster** is a working-class, queer writer with a DIY punk background. In 2014, he founded spoken word night That’s What She Said (now That’s What We Said), which he hosted in London until February 2020. He has also brought shows to sold-out runs at the Edinburgh Fringe and the Royal Albert Hall. From 2016 to 2021 he was a director of For Books’ Sake, where he championed marginalised and underrepresented writers. In 2022, his work in progress *Enjoy C\*\*k* was selected as one of TLC’s LGBTQ+ Free Reads; he is currently querying agents for the novel.

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**Petra Zajc** is a young aspiring author with a deep love for everything dark, wicked, and romantic. She loves writing stories that make people laugh, but she believes, as her writing indicates, that there is no real, genuine laughter without some darkness behind it. Her prose has already reached more than 250,000 reads online, and she is currently working on an improved and rewritten version of her novel that was beloved by many young people on the internet.

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**Raina Alidjani** lives in Philadelphia, where she was born and raised, with her husband, toddler son, and cat son. By day, she serves as the vice president of talent acquisition for an advertising agency. By night, she is a speculative fiction writer who loves to incorporate mythology and folklore into her writing with a feminist twist. She is first-generation Iranian American on her father’s side and Italian American on her mother’s side and draws influence from her rich cultural heritage. Her work has been published by *Myth & Lore, The Raven Review, Heartland Society of Women Writers,* and *Mulberry Literary.*

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**Reyzl Grace** is a poet, essayist, and translator whose work reflects her calling as a tender of books, violets, and shabbos candles. She is a past Pushcart nominee and finalist for the Jewish Women’s Poetry Prize and *Best Literary Translations*, with bylines in *Room, Rust & Moth, The Times of Israel*, and elsewhere. When she isn’t editing poetry for *Psaltery & Lyre* or *Cordella Magazine*, she works as a teen services librarian in Minneapolis.

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**R. W. Thorne** is a twenty-two-year-old writer and poet from the Scottish Highlands currently living in Edinburgh. His work is eclectic, but it usually reflects a strong link to his homeland and the wild. He has a taste for the macabre and romance poetry, too. He’s written for *The National* and *P&J*, and has had stories featured in *Extra Teeth*, *little living room*, and several Edinburgh-based zines. He also performs regularly at spoken word events in Edinburgh, Paris, and Durham.

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**Sam Casey** is a military instructor in the English department at the United States Naval Academy. She enjoys sailing, playing rugby, and reading poetry.

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**Sayani De** is a bibliophile, compulsive traveller, and sustainability enthusiast. Her work has been featured on *Muse India*, *Borderless Journal*, *Women’s Web*, and won a contest at StoryMirror. Sayani is trained as an engineer and works as a product manager at a software company.

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**Shantha Chinniah** is an Edinburgh writer with an MLitt in creative writing from the University of Glasgow. She also enjoys illustration and cartooning.

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**Surabhi Naik** was born and raised on the Konkan coast of India near Karwar. Her professional life as a designer/developer of interactive media nurtures her artistic career as a poet. She is a Story Gatherer in her many families of belonging and loves to teach workshops that liberate self-expression and thought. She initially trained as an architect and holds an MA in media studies from The New School in NYC, along with an MA in English from IGNOU. Her poetry takes the forms of spoken word, video poems, drawings, ethnographies, and short documentaries.

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**Zack Wilkins** is a writer from Salida, Colorado. He spends most of his free time climbing mountains to prove that cystic fibrosis can’t stop him.

A black and white image of a person

Description automatically generated

ABOUT THE SELKIE

The Selkie Publications is a non-profit community interest company that champions and publishes traditionally underrepresented writers and artists. It was founded in 2018 in Edinburgh, Scotland, with the intention of providing a platform for those whose background or life circumstances would otherwise make it difficult to gain a foothold in the traditional publishing industry. Through free or very affordable events, workshops, editorial services, and publication, The Selkie nourishes emerging writers and provides guidance, helping authors develop and improve their craft. To date, The Selkie has published more than 170 authors and produced four anthologies. Our team consists solely of volunteers who are passionate about publishing and highlighting traditionally marginalised voices. For more information about us, visit our website, follow us on social media, and sign up for our newsletter!

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