

Shadow Hand

Another girl who presents herself as a memory.
One more shape of memory.

The girl approaches the wall, casting a shadow. With chalk she traces her own image, diving down the cliff neck, climbing a hill shoulder, following the length of a long torso. To maintain the shape, she knows she must keep still. She must also keep the distance. If she pinpoints the light, chalkdust draws out her obscurity, radiating messy confessions: under prescriptive scrutiny, she blurs the look of the lens. When she's too far, lifelines withdraw. She associates with the tip of any diversion. She stands this way for hours, outlining the memory of her body. Until she reaches the part of the wall where her hand collides with the shadow's hand. No matter the impression she leaves, she confronts her own solitude. Her chalk can't embody the hand that holds it. This is her alternate route: placing the chalk in her left hand, her right hand leaning against the wall.

Her right hand leaning against the wall.

The Women of Gavalo

The Women of Gavalo know good wine isn't a product of the grape but of the barrel. They know when they've had enough. Avoiding all excess, they focus on ritual. In a cauldron of simmering water, the Women steep the bounty of their daily labour, the kitchen percolating with herbs brought in from the garden. Scents of *chamomili*, sage, *thimari* and fennel diffuse in rings over the table, fold an extra crease on the napkin; white curtains, soaking up the last wafting flavour, turn crimson. A rising heat blots the chimney draft. Hair strands escape the grip of braids. The Women of Gavalo often stir the brew with one eye on the flame and one hand on the ladle. Steam dilating the pores of their skin. Then the Women of Gavalo overturn their bottomless cauldron, and the wine barrel swells with a fragrant propensity. It perspires. The Women of Gavalo are marinading stiff planks of wood. Seeping with suggestions. For seven days and seven nights, the Women take turns holding vigil, tentatively peering over the brim of the barrel, their black kerchiefs persistently undone, dishevelled. One by one, they see a reflected face, contained for a moment on the surface of water, changing expression as it slips over the rim and another woman slides into place. This is their dance. Realization. By the time nearby fields are stripped of ripe cargo, and the grape clusters have been squelched by stampeding feet, the Women of Gavalo have infused the wood grain with such potency that the winemaker finds the job nearly done. The Women furtively wipe down the old barrel and whisk out the backdoor, darting a last aching look. The rest of the process is simply a purple juice fermenting in the dark. Another way of getting drunk.

The Women of Gavalo preserve live cultures. Their fridges are crammed with plastic yogourt containers. These women, of various age, size and temper, believe one source of sustenance can last for years, fermenting from bowl to bowl. Liquids turn into solids as the curdling knowledge presses along their lifeline of daughters, bridging all continents, genders. Loyalty isn't about the stuttering heart's affinities but about consistency, their blood viscous as plum pudding. The Women of Gavalo say passion is assembled by foraging the highest cupboards for ingredients, prying open the secret drawers. With each step they take along the kitchen – their fingers reaching, reaching up – the floor withdraws from the soles of their leather-bound feet, breadcrumbs wedged in the instep. The Women arrive in neat lines at the soggy trays at the back of their cupboard, where lentils and lima beans are sprouting in the dark. They stroke the quivering green filaments, and each shoot submits to their touch. By the end of the morning meal, it seems the Women have passed the time by transferring water from one glass to another. The Women release from their hands the last drop of garbage, and the metal can overflows, a pool of odours spreading its greasy halo. A dialogue of sounds rings in through the open window and urges the Women along: hooves of trotting horses, alarm clock of shrill roosters, the insistent motion of someone sweeping a balcony, broomstroke by broomstroke. Soon it's noon. The Women's stride is muffled by church bells in the distance endlessly chiming the hour. The schoolmasters, cooks and tailors take the cobbled road home. To the big houses of the Women of Gavalo. Their bigger barns. It's been long suspected the Women of Gavalo are partial to the sound of baying goats.

The Women of Gavalo occasionally turn sour. Maria drags a chair out of the bakery and deposits herself by the ice-cream freezer, where she'll stay for hours, bidding an aging son to dinner, dressed in the black habit of mourning. On the other side of the street, her son hunches over the table for a game of *thanasi*, ignores his mother's culinary bluff by slamming down the ace of clubs. The lemon perched on the tray swivels like a knob. Maria balances a steamy plateful in each hand: *calamari*, stewed beans, *kokkinisto*. Every few minutes, Maria readjusts her sedentary position, her ample hips spreading like dough along the four corners of the seat. When Maria's concealed the straw-pleated cushion, she smacks her bulbous knees together, the chair nearly collapsing under the pressure. The son, squinting at the hand he's been dealt, imagines Maria brooding over the staleness of her unleavened days, the afternoon heat stoking the oven of her flesh. Maria flattens the apron across her lap with a rolling pin arm, elbowing the ribs of passing strangers. Her heavy feet hold down the pavement. Her massive frame curbs the running wind, forces willful gusts in another direction. The son grabs hold of his card table for leverage.

A few metres from where Maria's stationed, a fat colony of ants hauls scraps of food from the littered sidewalk, burrows into dirt crevices for a secret feast of banana peels, apple bits. In their frenzied movement, Maria's son can see the choreography of his mother's widowed longing, an assembly of laden tables and hidden chairs. Maria's son slides off his own rickety seat at the thought of Maria gaining even an inch. He thinks of Maria lurching towards the wayward men – palms upturned, the steamy plateful in full view of gawking spectators as

she stabs at the air with a fork – and overturns a glassful of ouzo onto the card deck; ice cubes clinking against shards of glass.

Maria maintains herself by the bakery doors, preparing to knead another rising loaf, the smell of fresh bread unfurling across her shoulders like a flag. At times, Maria goes missing in the market for two weeks only to reappear with a month's worth of potatoes. Her blade peels back time like a mud-slicked rind, exposing the creamy flesh of root vegetables. For over forty-five years, Maria's prepared a widow's menu in spite of a miserly trade for ingredients. Hers is a perishable appetite. Like memory, it grows from what it feeds on. Inch by inch.

Maria's son bolts down the street as if escaping the bridle. His arms flail through the air as he whisks past his unyielding mother. He rushes into his own kitchen, and boils water. The room steams and steams. By degrees.

Secret

There's a room in a house on the hilltops of Crete with doors and shutters wide open, its stone floor polished by the sun. Burnt-red, cinnamon, candle-wax yellow, and plum; the room turns colour by the hour. The constant pressure of its circulating air can be felt for miles around, uninterrupted by any sort of closure – metal hinges, latches, the lid of tin boxes full of old letters, sad goodbyes. Passersby, having stopped by its front doors, hold on to their hats or their purses before entering the room, wrestling with the ghost of a breath. Once inside, no one pauses to adjust to the light or to orient themselves to the room's angles; they move from object to object in the manner of those long initiated into love, intimately making their way towards another.

Memory is its own embellishment. A room with high, vaulted ceilings, solid floors and unadorned walls. A room that serves as both bedroom and kitchen, the den and the parlour. Here, I lie down on the wrought-iron day-bed with its thick pillows and white cotton sheets, a breeze from the open window stroking my temples. Five steps later, I spoon sticky clumps of walnuts with honey from a porcelain plate by the counter. Everything near at hand, having come from someplace else: the silver wine decanter from grandmother's dowry, rust-mottled but reflecting my face on its surface; rows of ancestral portraits of men with dishevelled beards and waist-length hair, leaning against rifles as if canes. Shelves of books with cracking spines. A coal-burning stove still heavy with fossil fuels. Like grandmother, who learned to read and write at the age of forty, from old newspapers, old books; this room's disarray will take years to resolve. She's decoded the same message for over seventy years.

In daylight, cross-stitching doilies for migrant children, her needle pulling thread the way a pen pulls out language: drawing out the isolate hand. In darkness, listening to the rise and fall of grandfather's laboured breathing. Family legend has it that during a period of great famine, when the olive from every field was more stone than flesh, grandmother, barely eight years old, snuck out to strangers' funerals for the passing of bread. Great-uncle Mihali buried the crop from a field of walnut trees in an abandoned well, stockpiling for an imminent drought. This reserved sustenance he kept a secret for years. When he no longer remembered either his name or his location, he baffled his sons with riddles of buried treasure. They churned the sagging fields looking for gold. Restoring them to fertility.

Hanging on a nail over the sink, an old nylon stocking strains whey from curd, the drip-drip of milky serum a ticking clock. I know I can't retrieve what's gone missing, but I search for clues, cues: dark corners in a lit room prod my most private memories. The slurred shape of a sweater turned inside out. Pairs of scuffed workboots prompt me towards open doors. The Cretan dialect is a secret you're dying to tell but sworn to keep. In conversation, only half of each word takes root, consonants like melon seeds spat out during a meal, vowels like intakes of breath. The sound of swallowing. Nights under a roof of stars, dipping into a plate of bread and olives, cool air swabbing us clean, we saved the best bite for last. Heat rising from our skin. Our faces visible in the half-light. Radiating towards us from distant fields, ancient tree-roots probed the ground beneath our feet while we laced up our shoes, one by one. Even when we parted, we felt full.