

The Twilight Portal

Akila Richards

*Grandmother and granddaughter walk through a twilight portal that changes them
and the landscape forever.*

I wake
steeped in salty water and cradle
a ship in my sweat
a soaked twilight clings new born
the pillow a driftwood
under my silvered braids, that source through
the silk wrap of the ocean.

In lieu of the abducted ones worth their weight in unlived lives, or too much of it, my
granddaughter reaches for me. 'Omaah hello.' She strokes me with these words
until I respond. 'Ma Picky hello' and I rise into her smile with a hug. Our favourite

walks are at dusk, between lights, and so we walk into a breathless one, while Friston Forest backs us with coolness. Haven Brow's profile sharpens in the dying day and treading up Exceat Hill we bin our minds until serenity descends. A gust of air changes the landscape into grassy bends and bows and we are nourished. How Cuckmere River tidies herself in-in-in and baring her brown soft belly outwards. Such trust to be replenished again by the sea while the pandemic, isolation and grief devastated lives, while hostility rips undercurrents into more lives clinging to the waves' fringes. So we stumble into a vanishing landscape. Ma Picky points to the frayed edges of toothy fields, floating islands losing ground like this one. 'Omaah lean into me,' Ma Picky invites and we rest in our embrace. We look up. An illuminous lilac-grey expands over the Seven Sisters. The ocean breeze disappears into the distance, an unusual silence spreads. We don't hear the usual scuttle of skylarks, minotaur beetles and grasshoppers. The vibration around us shifts. A readiness with a held back breath emerges as our walking companion.

And then we see it, the portal that bows and bends time that carries an eternal twilight onto the other side. We stride through. We squat on a floating piece of earth. The wild grass resembles the back of Ma Picky as she sways and hums herself a tune. And my salty lines seep out again from my scalp over my eyes and rivulet into my chest. White crust dries in long marks and Ma Picky wipes me with her ice cream hands. She unwraps my scarf, wrings it out and lays it on the

depleted ground. The cracking mud immediately sucks up the moisture. Tender shoots and bold blue petals of Field-Forget-Me-Nots sparkle through, where my water was shed. I knot the hot ends of lamenting meadows around my head.

Ma Picky leads us on with hazelnut eyes and her Afro echoes the rusty-honey colours of the chalk grasslands that claim her as their own. I am glad as she, in lieu of the abducted ones, occupies my blue-green well, borrowed from the sea into a weathered heartland. Ma Picky was born in the South Downs and does not own this, or any land, yet humans are trafficked, workers shifting boxes are expendable, children are laboured in sick factories and the worn hands of cockle pickers drowned. Ma Picky lightens the air, 'I belong to my Seven Sisters' and opens her arms. In turn, I carry the visions of The Transparents – some call them ancestors – that walk before us, sit here with us now. Ma Picky sniffs the air and her agile ankles skip along. She converses with the new ley-lines and I sense the old river routes, the path of The Transparents. The forests that once covered these surrounding hills were cleared thousands of years ago, as humans and animals multiplied. Their branches grew veins, bent the wind and entangled the clouds until it rained. The Transparents walked easy then and when they lost their shelter of leafed hands, they took it as their task to keep the old songs, in creaks and moans and rush of the wind. Each past and living tree carries memories that cover the South Downs, in

their millions. They were people then. Now dust layers us with new skin. The air and earth are losing moisture, oxygen and nourishment.

Are we not at the tipping point

to witness our dreams fly

or crash?

Things fall apart that foretell

the day that ricocheted

between centuries ...

My pores open again and my feet squelch in these walking boots. Crumbs of earth with Common Restharrow seedlings sprout between my toes. Our footprints mark this cracked river bed. We divert down to Foxhole and I motion to Ma Picky that I want to lie down beside the sleeping cow. Her graceful legs fold under her land, her body a country of plenty that feeds nations. Ma Picky leans on the cow's giving neck and her and Ma Picky's ears twitch. We witness the cow's dreaming, in her largess of boundless roaming and un-slaughtered vistas, of a united herd in the elements. By now, water streams from my shoulders and from the lobe of my ears in long line earrings with salty residue on the crackling foliage. The surrounding parched grass reaches up. The riverbed inhales the evaporating moisture. My spine spills out and the soil is grateful. Sweat runs from my back and calves and angel wings of Yellow

Vetchlings uncurl. Once emptied, I unclithe, shake out my boots and toes and wring out the soaked garments and spread them down. I enjoy the betwixt light, on this waiting land, naked where nobody needs shade. Bits of me vaporise into the ether and I feel lighter. Common Restharrow buds around my feet. Wild Thyme withdraws the last layer of wetness and, rejuvenated, lifts up my dry, scented clothes. As I dress, Ma Picky sniffs the air and her eyes turn liquorice and stray this and that way. She elongates her neck forward and up, turns her ears rear and front, towards the far out ebbing. We sip tea from the flask and eat nuts. Ma Picky strokes the dreaming cow's forehead and with a furry grip raises me up. We delve deeper into the land; hand in hand with our light inside.

She races ahead so fast that her passionate shawl flutters up in the air, turning back onto the South Downs Way until we reach Haven Brow. Her arms and heart branch around me to the steepest top. I sense excitement in her trembling limbs. The air is thick and charged. 'Omaah nearly there, we'll make it.' Encrusted shingles powder below our footfall. Suddenly, two large chunks of Haven Brow snap off and crumble onto the pebbled shore. Further along by the Mean Low Waters, another snap and yet another. We witness the falls with a jolt, then with concern and finally with understanding. I gush again and hear creaks and moans nearby and realise they are mine. The Transparents borrowed my tongue and the length of my throat and tuned me to the heart of things. Ma Pickey does not understand the words I cast

into the ground, but we hold tight to each other; a cord holding land and love together. We settle down, only nothing looks the same. As we gaze out and scan across for the soothing exhale of waves and wind, we are acquainted with a completely altered view. We gasp in shockwaves and gradually realise the enormity of an entirely drained seabed. The ocean has disappeared and the air is unmoved. As our eyes accustom to the vast void below and our ears to the resonance of a chasm, a skeleton of an enormous structure emerges. Gigantic ribs pierce the air and others curve around a huge hollow bowel. A splintered neck points inland. I've heard of a wreck that hit these shores in 1747 *The Nympha Americana* and it seems, made a last journey to this Haven. It had carried a hundred workers, transported bales of cloths and velvet, lemons, peppers, nut-oil and spices, wine and brandy and £5,000 worth of gold coins. The shipwreck gifted us with a harvest of foreign lands, dispersed in the lap of the Seven Sisters. That same gold shimmers in the holographic light of water rivulets. I read that their value today is £1,232,210.76, yet unclaimed in priceless lives. In that light, ever more gold pieces glint among the pebbles. This moment granted us a memory, laid before our eyes, and unknown ones. The top of my head burbles up into a jet stream, but this time I taste an overflowing caress of sweetness. All my salt is in the earth. My collar bones spurt up, streams deliver from my hands, my chest opens to a glistening torrent, my belly button surges forth a twirling cord. Up and sideways the fountains spray. The streams from the bottom of my feet divert into currents, merge to a stream, plough

the arid terrain and carve into the rock below. The earth shudders with relief and the landscape is rearranged. Elderflower bushes bloom, grass fields wave and dormant mother trees spring up as the new waters burrow deeper. Their waters twist and surge forward until they cascade over the cliff edge in hundreds of silvered braids. The rush of the first light-laced waterfall charges the atmosphere with vibrancy and freshness. Clouds clap in the west and the air smells of lush rain. In the surrounding fields and valleys, puddles become ponds, become pools and dream of lakes. Cuckmere River brims with exultation and rushes in the new tide with a reconciled exhale. The old river routes refill the diminished ground waters and course them eagerly into a grateful land. A water symphony imbues the air with gurgles, splashes and outright laughter from billions of joyful tears.

Covered in fizzy mist and popping air bubbles, Ma Picky has already sprinted, light as an oribi, down the grassy slope along the chalk path of Haven Brow onto the shore. She dances among the gold, by the rushing mouth of Cuckmere River. She twirls the planet in revolutions and leaps in a joyful howl. She collects two handfuls of gold coins and, light footed, speeds over the seabed that welcomes the watery surge of rapture and exuberance. She climbs up the top of the mast. Split bales drape down in pomegranate velvet. Succulent lemons stud the gaps of the bowel. Their zesty aroma, combined with spiked clove stars, cracked nutmeg and crushed pepper, imbue the upcoming breeze. Ma Picky takes her seat and positions the gold

of priceless lives on her head, braids some into her Afro curls, some already entangle on the side of her pulsating temples. And in the last minutes of the light portal closing, the coined crown illuminates the air and her joyful features. Her ears largen to pick up the outermost reverberation. Her eyes widen to pierce her sight from these shores over sapped ocean ground. She sweeps over vast planes and rifts, valleys and peaks, far-off countries and along continents, that are littered with old cargo, slave, pirate, war and other petrified sculptures. They rust, collapse and break apart, in the dried-up cemeteries. Light is the driftwood that abducted and trafficked millions of people. Heavy is the gold that accumulates and rises into hills and mountains. Spent is the past that views the unlive future in young, borrowed eyes.

And the Transparents make themselves visible in us.

Boundless waters pour from each cell and centre, all of me.

A Haven translates my restful dream into a new existence
as my well quenches the longest thirst between sky and earth.

Ma Picky opens her vocal chords

her jubilant song releases the twilight

disintegrates past shadows

harnesses a changed land into a startled dawn.

Akila Richards

Akila Richards is a poet, writer and spoken word artist, performing and collaborating in the UK and abroad. She has created work for theatre, audio podcasts, soundscapes and film, digital platforms, cultural and for artistic events. Her most recent poems and short stories featured in 'Witness Stand' at Brighton Festival 22, Artist in House residency at Brighton Dome for her ongoing 'Rest Experience' exploration, Covert Magazine and the speculative anthology *Glimpse* (Peepal Tree Press). Akila's poetry pamphlet 'Ritual for a Mango' is currently being edited for publication and she is writing her first novel.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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