

OTHERS IN THE GRASSLANDS

The lapis low slung moon hangs like an unmoving heavy droplet just above the dim horizon. There is no rain but there is a sulphurous dust that falls gradually invading both mood and nostrils.

Grasslands grow on the book as She sits and reads - beak masked in sturdy boots. Birds fly in towards the cat god that sits alert beside her.

Both She and the cat god feel stirrings of white hot fear when the birds fly in. Sometimes they don't come. But that's the nature of unwelcome things - if they don't come their shadow falls anyway, slowly scorching the paper words of the only book they have. Theirs is a very small world.

The birds always approach them from behind with the building rhythmic stealth of dark wings beating. Their shadows reach out before them as the sun lowers in the sky. Her beak mask always saves them from attack.

Everything She reads appears on her face. She does not know this. There are no mirrors in the grasslands. It has never occurred to her to wonder what her face looks like. She never sees another face.

The cat god has a face of sorts but having sacrificed its long whiskers to terraform the grasslands it looks wistfully at a clump of grass and wonders if it was worth it. Wonders if there are spells of reparation. Sacrificing whiskers for cats is life changing. A worthy enterprise yet still somehow incomplete. But neither She nor Cat know what is missing. And yet and yet something is not right. They feel disquieted.

The birds are part of it - part of the dark when it gathers in clumps at the edges. Yes here darkness always huddles. It doesn't always shiver but it always clumps together in disconcerting ways. Darkness can be unpredictable. A place where shadows gather growing bold.

They never knew the ants were listening to the readings while they built their great hills in the grasslands. The story was endless and kafkaesque. Gradually the ant mounds get bigger.

Long after She and Cat had leave for other worlds the ants continue to build.

The darkness gradually becomes as regular as breathing. As it grows light becomes steady and only flickers occasionally.

The gods leave the great book in a hurry owing rent. They are only minor gods after all. The birds stay on and sing when the cicadas stop their grassland engine noise.

The ants remember some of the stories and remember She and Cat. The discarded beak mask was left behind. It becomes an icon of hope. Both ants and cicadas gather round it for comfort and remembering. Their faith is strong.

The ants believe now that they know their reason for building and understand why they build their mounds so high. Ants crawl across the ancient breeze blown pages now the gods have gone.

The stories are told and retold till truth ceases to matter. The thing that matters is the words are there. The heat begins to scorch the tattered pages. Paths become cinder tracks. Time is getting flatter as is space.

Darkness begins rolling around the far horizon as if in pain. It gathers in such large dense clumps that it presses down on the dry grass and ant hills flatten whenever it rolls in.

The ants hopes begin to die as do the ants themselves. The dark begins to roar so loud there is no room for thought or faith and no escape.

Only a spatial stones throw away hangs the large blue moon.

On the moon's surface, sturdy boots must be worn at all times.

There is only a little air. Notebooks must be put away in pockets.

The pathfinders can hear the darkness roar at night when everything is still.

But it is a world away and it can be tuned out.

It must be tuned out or fear will come.

Strong boots are most important as there are many dusty yellow paths to find. Marching along in sturdy boots gives pathfinders purpose and reasons to make pencil maps of lost terrain.

They also make important finds which must be wrapped and hidden. Coordinates encoded and safely noted to be read in tents at night after watching spectacular flocks of birds write evening messages in orange sky. Pathfinders put their boots outside their tents at night for health and safety.

When darkness falls pale blue bats scream and stream out of the blue moss caves in unsettling masses. Their droppings land on target littering the ground in vertical piles as they hover catching fire bugs. Fingers of morning light find the lapis moon covered in gooey piles of sticky poo that dry and harden on a lazy day. Perversely when crunched under foot or just through passages of time the blue poo crumbles into orange dust.

Pathfinders words are written on their skin. On their heads beak cones are proudly worn to deflect thoughts other than the paths they tread and the things they find to wrap which they bury deep in the ochre dust.

Watching each of the pathfinders with her huge binoculars is the daughter of She. From her far vantage point she can track them all. Words are crawling across her skin in a conflicting emotion. For as much as pathfinders explore and map new territory she has to keep monitoring their continual plodding activity.

High winds whip her shimmering hair into her mouth but she keeps her eyes staring steadily towards the moons blue surface. If they get near the precious things she has hidden she has found ways of causing little diversions. The pathfinders continue their solitary mapping of the circuitous paths they tread indefinitely as they have no natural predators except themselves.

Where did She and Cat end up? In a debtors prison for minor gods deep in Under Heaven. They spend the sentences that role across their skin in semi darkness. It is, after all, valuable currency to warders that have torches. They spend their time counting the high cost of what was once their freedom. The doors of Under Heaven are always open but once incarceration has taken place religious enthusiasm gradually dies.