

This story was commissioned by Openstories and Manchester Literature Festival for the 2014 Blog North Awards. It was performed by the author at the Blog North Awards event on 8 October, 2014 at The Deaf Institute, Manchester.

Pomona Fair
Claire Dean

‘Your father tells the stories, not me.’ Mum was sitting on the canalside, knees pulled up against her chest, face almost hidden in her long grey skirt.

I weighed the blackberries in my palms. I couldn't move my fingers without crushing or dropping some. ‘Why bother telling me I can't eat them if you're not going to explain it,’ I said.

On the dank water tiny lights uncurled into flowers, their petals spinning with the breeze. At the banks they dimmed as they were caught in the flotsam of cans and wrappers and sagging buddleia heads.

Mum's voice was muffled by her skirt. ‘The devil spits on them after Michaelmas. Something like that. Your Great Gran always said.’

I let the blackberries fall from my hands into the long grass. I was more worried about piss than devil spit, but still. ‘Shall we go and look at the stalls?’ I asked.

‘What time is your father on? I need to get home.’

‘Eight,’ I said. Mum could often be difficult, but that night was different; she seemed fearful somehow. I turned back towards the stalls under the tram bridge, holding the brambles aside for her to follow without checking that she was. My feet sank into the dusty gravel. ‘It's like being on a grey beach,’ I said. It was nothing like a beach. The bridge's concrete arches made a blunt-edged cathedral, with luminous graffiti tags in place of stained glass windows. When a tram rolled overhead, the whole structure sang out. Wires had been strung up to display people's wares – paintings, baubles, photographs and marionettes all swung precariously with the wind.

Most of the stalls didn't have signs and with some it was hard to tell what they were selling without getting close, which I suppose was the point. There was one I thought was a

jewellery stall, but instead of earrings the husks of chrysalides were pinned to boards. Only a few of them were fat and dark with still-forming wings.

‘Name a butterfly, love?’ The stallholder was wrapped in a rainbow of scarves.

‘No thanks,’ I said.

‘Make a wish and its wings will carry it for you,’ she said.

‘No thank you,’ Mum said too loudly.

There was a tea stall, with jars and jars of petals and leaves, old fashioned scales and brass scoops. People crowded round sipping steaming nettle and rum toddies from big glass mugs. Another stall was crammed with rainglobes. In larger ones at the back, dark-edged cumulus clouds hung above Central Library and Beetham tower. Rain streamed beneath the glass in ones that held the moors. I picked up a small globe with a miniature town hall at its centre shrouded in mizzle. As I tipped it to see the price underneath and then righted it again, heavy drops made paths up and down its sides.

‘How on earth can they flog the people of Manchester their own rain?’ Mum said.

We passed Seed Dispensaries and stalls with flower soaps growing in shallow trays. There were single stem candles, too, with petals cupping the wicks. There was a long queue at a van selling birds on buns – tiny boneless swallows, finches and robins served on floury baps. There were jars of damson chutney, ginger jam and green mayonnaise to lace the birds with. The air was riddled with the smells of grilled meat, grease and rain-soaked soil.

We pressed through the crowd towards the flea market. A man in a suit tried to hand me a flyer. ‘Good evening, ladies. Did you know where a bramble touches the ground it roots and reaches up again? We’re asking people tonight to root and reach with us for – ’

‘We’re not interested.’ Mum said.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘They’ve made the giant.’ A huge female figure had been sculpted from brambles at the entrance to the hedge maze. I pulled Mum towards her. ‘She’s just like she is in that painting in the gallery – all made of leaves.’

Mum stared up at the giant.

‘You know the one. She’s right at the edge of the picture, almost part of the wall, almost part of the frame. And all of it, the wall, her dress, the frame are overgrown with leaves.’

Mum pulled away and headed for the stalls.

'I used to dream about her all the time when I was little, do you remember?'

We'd stopped at a stall selling maps and prints. 'I remember,' she said.

'You know there were loads of sightings of her at one point.'

Mum stooped over a box and flicked through the maps.

'People used to write letters to the *Manchester Evening News* about her,' I said.

They called her the Manchester Giant.' I started to flick through maps too. Some were threadbare, others smudged. I liked the labels on the dividers – Invisible Cities, Interiors, Constellations, Polite Cartography, Confessional. Mum was rifling through them too quickly to actually look at any properly. There was a box full of postcards and another of old photographs – stern portraits and awkward family groups. 'I read about an experiment where they put gorillas into everyday photographs,' I said. 'And nobody sees them. If you're not expecting to see something it might as well not be there.'

Mum moved to the next stall, which was selling old suitcases, boxes, and books carved out to be containers.

'It was always the same in my dream,' I said, 'she'd peel away from a wall. Her footsteps thundered through the soles of my feet right up into my head. She was crushing the flowers. I wanted to shout at her not to, but I had no voice. During playtimes at school I used to stare and stare at a wall that was covered in ivy waiting for her to move and give herself away.'

'You saw her when you were little,' Mum said. She walked on to the next stall.

'What?'

'We were here.' Mum stood completely still. Her eyes were fixed on one of the stall's moon-like drums – its papery skin stretched over wood. I waited, willing her to say more.

'I shouldn't have said anything,' she said and she headed away, through clusters of people, into the long grass at the water's edge. From the river side of the island you could see more of the city. Mum was a thin shadow against its twinkling lights. I tried to picture a huge shadow around hers, to feel for the giant's footsteps. Waiting for her to speak made everything hum.

'This used to be a place you didn't come to,' she said. 'A hidden place. From the tram or the other side of the canal, you would have said it was derelict. There was a road that went nowhere. Pavements cracked by tree roots. There were bee orchids and meadowsweet. We heard a skylark once. I never got to leave the city. I could breathe again when I came here. The man who brought me here always knew the names for everything; bindweed, silver birch, lapwing, little ringed plover.'

I didn't want to hear about some old boyfriend. I was desperate for her to explain about me seeing the giant. I was jiggling about with impatience, but Mum didn't notice. It was like she was unravelling somehow.

'We never saw anyone else here. Only the things they left behind. Empty cans, coils of discarded fishing line. He knew all about the history of this place. It was a pleasure gardens at one time, then they dug a dockyard out of it, and then it was just left. There used to be a huge palace here for dancing, a camera obscura, flying swings. He'd pick up a bit of broken tile, hold it up like a rare gem and tell me about when the chemical works exploded. He made rubble beautiful. He tried to give me that bit of tile, but I didn't take it. We couldn't give each other anything to keep.

Time would stretch out here, as though we could be together for a day rather than an hour. It was a cruel illusion. The second I set foot back on the towpath everything would flip. Our time together was nothing. The gaps between us meeting were immense.

Your brother was at school. I used to leave you with Irene next door and say I was going to do the food shopping. But one day she was sick. I had to bring you with me. Having you here with us made it too real. I hadn't been able to pin down what we were doing until then. It was like a dream where you can trace round its edges when you wake up, but the second you think of it straight on it's gone.

I didn't talk much. I wanted to pick blackberries, but they were still too young and green. I watched his face. I let him tell the story of how we had to stop. I've never seen a man look so sad.

You were toddling about. You'd found a discarded condom, shining and sticky in the sunlight. I screamed at you to drop it. The noise must have startled her. When she rose up

over you... I ... she was... You were barely speaking yet. Feefy you used to shout for a long time afterwards, feefy feefy feefy.'

'Fo fum,' I said.

Mum looked up at me. I could see the pain in her face.

I turned away first. I tramped down the long grass, heading for the storytelling tent. It was nearly eight. Dad was on at eight. A parade was weaving through the crowd, gathering people into its wake. A ragbag of stilt-legged demons and goddesses laughed, sang and shouted insults at onlookers. They wore leaves and flowers, and masks with pendulous noses and leery expressions. Every one of them seemed to be singing a slightly different song. I pushed through the swirling din.

The interior of the storytelling tent was hushed. There was a thick smell of warm of bodies and damp grass. Mum must have followed close behind me. She sat down next to me but left a space between us. The sides of the tent were a dim kaleidoscope. The familiar bulk of my dad was silhouetted centre stage; he was taking in the audience as they entered. People settled on benches, tucked their coats in underneath. There were murmurs and giggles. I glanced at Mum. She was rigid, hands gripping the bench, head tucked almost to her chest. I rested one of my hands on the bench to make the gap between us smaller.

'We all saw the giant that day,' she said, her words barely audible. 'And none of us could tell anyone.'

