

The Physicians

by Fflur Dafydd

It made sense, in a way, that it started with a garden, and then ended with one. Ceinwen heard the announcement on the makeshift radio she'd managed to cobble together out of what was left of her kitchen table, attaching some wiring to it that had suddenly sprung up from the floorboards like weeds, adding the handset of their old landline as a speaker. She'd become quite good at fashioning things into other things. She often wished her partner, Petra, could be here to see how capable she now was; it seemed an age away when she would have to ask *her* to assemble all the new furniture, and hang all the paintings. Inconceivable now, of course, the buying, the spending, filling her home with random things off the internet. Now you just made do with what you found, scavenging among the rubble that used to be your home. Some of their mum friends, she remembered, would moan daily about the *absolute state of their houses*, without realizing that in the end, a messy lounge was the least of your worries when someone outside was directing a crane and a wrecking ball to it.

All of them gone now, of course. Petra, those mothers, those lounges, the sofa delivery guy, the artists who believed splashing a bit of paint on canvas could ensure their immortality, and also gone are those she simply cannot, will not, acknowledge as being gone. Those three little ones whose DNA and cells are still embedded deeply inside her, she hopes, in her blood, in her organs, shed during the precious time they grew in the darkness inside her, when she was able to protect them from all this. She considers herself no more than a chimera now, half-woman, half-mammal, an arrangement of body parts that miraculously still function, a mere matrix of memories.

She was half asleep when she heard the tinny voice coming out of the handset, telling people that the National Botanic Gardens were believed to be entirely abandoned and therefore free to use as people wished: either to take shelter, to forage, or simply to rehouse themselves

somewhere in the big glass house, among the foliage. You needed to be careful about announcements like these; not all were official channels now, and not all sanctuaries turned out to be true, or safe. Last week she'd walked five miles to the wool museum to find government officials being battered by a group of desperate teenage girls, who'd then begun smashing the display cabinets to get at the traditional cloth blankets, taking the spinning wheels apart to use as weapons. She'd hurried away from the chaos, blood-stained tufts of wool sticking to her feet like some terrible candy floss.

Ceinwen had her own reasons for wanting to visit the garden. For one thing, it had been the last place the boys had been, on a school trip, before everything happened. She wondered if their skin particles might still be hovering in the air somewhere, whether the whorls of their fingerprints might have lingered on the display cabinets, the tiny spirals of their lives imprinted on the glass.

And if she did die there, Ceinwen thought that surely it made sense to meet your end in a place where the pulverized human form could simply fall down into the plant roots; her corpse offering itself up as the perfect compost, a new exotic plant species bedding down into her remains. Ceinwen wondered whether the cells of her babies would also then grow into the plant, and if, in fact, she would still be able to defy her own extinction, and theirs, by becoming a spiral of DNA on a branch. Whether those new, glossy leaves would somehow remember all that had happened to her, to Petra, and their boys.

As she walks past the deserted welcome desk she half expects to see staff popping their heads up over the counter, as though the puppet show of normal life could be tugged back into existence at any moment. Walking through the concrete arch, onto the pathway leading up to the glass dome, she hears birds chattering for the first time in weeks, a welcoming committee all of their own. For a brief moment, Ceinwen can almost forget that the rest of the world has fallen away behind her. But then the stench of the algal blooms on the lake's surface foists itself into her nostrils. She remembers how she used to loiter here, holding Petra's hand, while the boys would feed the ducks. But now all that remains of that memory is a solitary, dead duck leg sticking

up from the water in protest, a rubbery, upturned exclamation mark objecting to the toxic brown quagmire that has congealed around it.

But just as surely as the ducks are dead, the butterflies have returned, thanks to the peonies and rudbeckia and sparges that were planted long ago by those long gone, and have kept blossoming in spite of themselves; those transplanted from other countries and brought here to resurface, while the ragged robin and the ox-eye daisy, the native plants of her own country, have taken root next to them, proud to be rubbing shoulders with the higher echelons of horticulture, fusing together in a carnival of colour and nectar. A butterfly appears right next to her, a gatekeeper, nectaring with open wings. *lâr fach yr haf*, as they call them in her native tongue, a *small summer hen*. She resists the urge to snatch it, as she has seen some do in desperation, and swallow it whole.

At the top of the pathway it comes into view. The glass dome that once seemed like a majestic, all-knowing, all-seeing eye, the largest single-span glasshouse in the world. Something for their small country to boast about. Yet now it looks more like an end point, a final destination, a kind of holding centre she's been travelling towards throughout her life.

A fug of unpleasant heat hits her as she enters, masking another curious smell; a strange commingling of humans decaying and plants thriving. Kneeling next to the Californian Chaparral by the entrance is a half-naked woman in a dirty toga fashioned out of a torn-up dressing gown.

"It's like being at home," she says, in a Californian drawl. "Before the fires."

Ceinwen doesn't respond. At the beginning of all this she tried so hard to help the strangers who turned to her, listening to their half-mad, nonsensical babble. Her old self is still there in its chimeric, mammalian shell; the doctor in her who has been trained to be aware of other people's mental state, their needs. But she's almost immune to it all now.

"The plants around it knew how to survive the fire," the woman continues, in a daze. "Some bulbs would just lie there dormant for years, only growing once the ground was cleared by fire and soaked by rain. It says here that some of the other plants thrived on it... the fire that

is, they used it, to trigger their seed germination. Some things, some people... need disaster, don't they. To live."

Ceinwen can see that this woman, like her, is not herself anymore, or even really here; she's around eight thousand miles away, in a forest in California, awaiting a fire. She doesn't seem to notice Ceinwen taking small steps away from her, and towards a display tunnel at the far end of the dome—a place her boys had visited, in the time before.

They had burst back into the house, the three of them, tripping over each other to be the first to tell her about the physicians, the famous twelfth-century native herbalists. Ceinwen had told them to look out for the display, because her grandmother had always insisted that she was a direct descendant of the physicians, that it was where her desire to cure people had come from, and she wanted the boys to feel a connection. And yet the boys were slightly confused by this claim, because the tour guide had told them that the physicians had descended from some mythical creature: a female herbalist who'd emerged from a lake, married a farmer, and brought her family up in a nearby farm. She'd warned the farmer that if he dared hit her three times, she would return to the lake, and when the farmer inevitably did do this, she'd returned to the lake, leaving her sons to carry on with her work as physicians. Ceinwen's boys wanted to know that if they were descendants of someone who was not actually real, did that mean they really existed? And was there any chance that she too, their very own physician, would return to the water one day?

"Typical kind of myth this country likes to bang on about," she remembers Petra saying, draining the pasta at the sink. "Woman has knowledge, men steal it from her, send her away again, the end. Well, yes, boys, you do exist, you do. Your existence was something... we worked very hard at, OK? And your Mum and I, we're not going anywhere. I can't stand cold water anyway."

Ceinwen had laughed at the time, had consoled her three boys that they were indeed real people, not some conjuring of myth and air. But when the water came for them, washed them clean away with Petra and the rest of the village while she was away at her medical conference,

Ceinwen started to find comfort in the fact that perhaps they had never been real at all, any of them, and that perhaps the only reason she was still here was because her entire life up until now had been lived underwater, that she was only just re-emerging from it to find that everything and everyone she had known and loved up until now had been nothing but a watery imagining.

She bows her head to enter the darkened room that is the old apothecary. The display windows that contained the tinctures have all been raided, quinine and tropane alkaloids all emptied from their bottles. Any tiny fingerprints that may have been there have been smudged by blood. She has always assumed that this old apothecary was pure artifice, dressed like an old-fashioned pharmacy by a designer or a marketing officer just to entertain school children, and yet she sees from the leftover pieces of Mexican yam and torn hemlock that someone has gone to the effort of following the physicians' recipes properly. Even though no one was meant to touch it, even though it would not matter that it was a pretense; someone, somewhere, had taken time to make it real.

A siren sounds above her head. A siren she's been listening out for since starting out on each one of her journeys these past few weeks—one that confirms that the place is no longer safe, that she only has a few minutes to get out. She is being asked to make a choice. To choose a direction. To play her part in her own myth.

She walks back out into the dome. The Californian lady has made a bed for herself in the chaparral and has her arms outstretched. Looking up, Ceinwen sees that her eyes are transfixed by the large crane and wrecking ball that is being swung like a pendulum in the direction of the glass. Glass, of course, she realizes, is a commodity now. It can be made, and remade, unlike her.

Ceinwen lies down next to the woman and waits, clawing at the soil—a smattering of life beneath her fingernails, a dark crescent where she hopes something might regrow after she is gone. We are all just things, she tells herself as the glass shards come for her, things grown from seeds, and some fare better than others. She thinks of the seeds that are waiting beneath her body now, that have been dormant all this time, just waiting for her to disappear and for the fire and chaos to clear. She envies how a seed knows more than she does about its own fate, how it

has a plan to thrive and grow and multiply, and forge its way on through and beyond disaster. And as she imagines those seeds getting ready to emerge, to travel upwards towards the light, she prepares herself to become nothing more now than a place for them to flourish, the myth of their making.