

A Blade Called Privilege

With all due respect to the collective concern, I will remind you that I, as a Romani woman, have no door to close. I cannot isolate myself from the world's horrors, and this is the thrust of my call for literary activism. Through poverty and discrimination, I wrote, and if I had not written, my life would not have changed. I still face these ravages, but I face them with the power of publication behind me, with the assertion that I can make a rogue life of my trades, my art, and academia, and that when I write about the Romani experience, I am writing towards equality. It is absurd to assume that because I support literary activism that it is the only activism in which I, or any other writer, partakes. The purpose of my part in Amy King's piece "What is Literary Activism" was to demonstrate that activism begins with words, voice, and visibility. How can you fight for your struggle, for basic human rights, if people do not know that your struggle exists? If they do not hear a word about it? Literary activism sounds through the streets and right through those shut doors you mention. To worry that we, the assembled writers, do not understand the point of activism is unnecessary, myopic, and patronizing. We need a battle cry; we write the battle cry. And mine is born from my experience. Speaking only for myself, rest assured that I do not have the privilege of isolating myself from the streets.

—Jessica Reidy, penned from the road

If there's hell it dwells above. A morning summer haze shapes teardrop dew on gundelia stalks. Overcast sunlight reflects off the Spectacle bathing these lands in the aftertaste of a new day. It levitates as a ghostly chandelier colossus in the sky watchful beyond all horizons. It reabsorbs what the light touches, sampling the environment as real-time memory until it reaches singularity. When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings - dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. Wherever representation becomes independent, the Spectacle regenerates itself.¹ Pending completion, it force-feeds the earth energy until dependency deforms the spine of this ridge wall to crack, giving me the perfect position to climb.

Dead olive branches twist out of rock in homage to a time when we knew how to resist. It's difficult to navigate with my steel toe blisters slipping against gravel, but the air here's crisp. Sumac spiced breezes dance freer the higher I go. Gunmetal armor plates strapped from head to

¹ Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*, Black & Red, 1977, p. 11.

toe stagger my every attempt to mount the plateau once I'm there, reeling me sideways-clumsy to my knees. Face to dirt, bees bombinate vague promises of honey somewhere along their stone rubble routes. They bathe in patches of baby breath moss dotted with anise between faded statues. There must be a water source nearby. One step in front of the other. Gotta find someplace to rest before heading into the valley; can't handle much more stress with this concrete shield lashed across my back.

In the far off sky space-time twists inward until there's a thundrous concussive snap. Through the eye of a quantum tear, neighborhoods of crystal towers dead weight fall to the crags below like an open faucet. The crepitation of glass mansions mimics the call of cicadas. In the time it takes to remember my legs the Glitch ceases to exist, restoring the illusion of peace through silence.

I'm not sure where to go from here. The plateau stretches for leagues, jagged with a wild rock foreground to lofty mountains. Broken gabled crypts landfill in pockets around me like tools unworthy of salvage. I choose to follow red carnations until they lead me to a stone outcrop awning. Beneath its protection is a fire pit shaped by desperate hands, exing claw marks cementing clay dirt. Haven't seen a soul since leaving the Garden and the last one I did prophesied I'd never again. Good thing absolute-definites coming from someone with no stake in the matter isn't worth a sack of shit.

We come from an oasis untouched by destructive anomalies. The Garden was founded by survivors of the last war who escaped these killing fields once the dust settled. Over centuries untreated trauma healed into generational scar tissue until here my dumbass stands trying to remember what we've forgotten. Just my luck I've got an old stab wound inflicting phantom pain

as my only guiding light. It's the pit that gets a smile, but the gunpowder snap of a Glitch makes me laugh for the first time today.

Getting a hundred pounds of shield off my back sends blood rushing to my head. A golden sash ripped from the hauberk of my Father acts as a leveraging grip, but the damn thing dangles in the wind just out of reach. So I squat real low like the world's my outhouse, teeth grit, fingers wrapped around the concrete edges to lift off its hooked frame. Involuntary noises bring the illusion of defecation to perfection. Sunbirds nesting in a tree nearby take flight while sweat jewels around my head like a tiara. Once the last corner shimmies out of pocket the shield goes sideways, crashing to the ground in a cloud of dust. The convex shape vibrates a deadpan language as if whispering a secret to the earth. Might understand the waning conversation if I press my ear to the surface, but the freedom of relief distracts me from what's happening to what's dead ahead.

The pit's no bigger than an inverted anthill easily mistaken for nothing if not for the powder hearth nestled at the bottom. Hard to say how long it's been, but the last visitor can't be ashes too; nothing lasts long here, yet here it is. Doesn't matter if we find each other, I need it to be true. The rock awning grants protection against the Spectacle light cooling my body in suspended stillness, but enough for now; I only just started this morning. After some ankle-pop torso-twisting joint-pulls, rising to my feet under the weight of armor is easy enough. Okay. Need to get what's needed. Kindling might be tough to gather depending on what the landscape feels like being today.

Every fire demands a sacrifice to keep it going, but I won't be pulling daisies. Mother taught me better than to waste when there's enough to gather. Scanning my surroundings there's not a fallen branch in sight, so I guess I'm getting creative. Scaled steel plates tailor fit for some

long dead warrior creak with each forward step. Splintered mausoleums litter mosaic glass like constellations crunching beneath my boots. A white flag, some bramble between granite, and before I know it there's enough to last for cooking. Animals exit the soundscape on my walk back to the pit, but it barely registers. I'm lost figuring out how to light the spark.

Using a quarter of what's gathered I carefully entwine the banner in thorns leaving sheared ends outside the clawed hole like wicks. Retrieving my pack I'm relieved to find the food from home safe in their containers. Some bread and nuts, pomegranates and dates, but also a padded briefcase kerchief-wrapped at the bottom. Inside nestle twelve perfect eggs left unbroken. Now I can breathe.

Once everything is out of the bag detaching the metal frame from the shield is easy. I'm hesitant to grasp the inner shagreen handle of this thing. This thing's too brutal to be called a proper weapon, but I admire the feats of my father cleaving the edge of a shooting star to make it one. So now I must wield it. Swath the sash around my knuckles a few times and grip tight to shoulder roll momentum soft swing pendulum rev-up until the moment's ripe for a pump action pitch launching the shield high in the air. Halfway down I glove the insole grip and brace against gravity's impact; didn't train for nothing. Swagger my way back to the pit with a renewed sense of confidence. Crouching beside the bramble I suspend my shield arm over it and close the other fist, encasing knuckles in steel. Like an ape discovering a tool, I pound.

Echoes of labor chime throughout this silenced place punch after punch. From shoulder to calf muscular convulsions push sweat. In my battering flurry I start feeling silly, but a glancing blow gives me what I'm looking for. It extinguishes before reaching the nest, but no matter, I've got the gist. Turning the angle of my strike, I scrape my knuckle guard up and down with a vicious burst of speed. My laughter's manic as the pummeling continues blow after blow

after- aha! Sparks waterfall onto the flag igniting a sustained fire. Shield down, hands to knees, gradient chuckles harmonize with each satisfying crackle. I am alive. And then hear a pop.

At first I write it off as moisture in the vines escaping heat, but then another blip comes and then another in quick succession until space-time twists inward to burst. Above me a Glitch tears vantablack seams through reality. Irrational thoughts tell me exhaling causes pandemonium. A smaller voice begs me to run. Blue in the face, I listen.

Shrill adhesive suction on the opposite side of eternity climb octaves higher indicating another event. Haste does me no favors catching my foot over exposed roots. Clamoring for a safety that doesn't exist I turn just in time to hear the gunpowder snap of a Glitch complete. Alexandrian spires vomit from the portal like a kidnapped breech baby hurtling toward the cliffs. Consumed by fire the building catches the plateau's edge a hundred yards away with an impact that roils me prone to my stomach; arms over head, butt clenched, ears ringing. Peeking between elbows all I see are bricks and smoldering scrolls as the bulk groans to a metal twisting halt at the bottom of the valley.

Boxed breathing helps me regain control of my nerves. The rift still lingers, seams wafting in place against the wind but otherwise dormant. Curious thing, that; never knew a Glitch to stay after ruin. Can't shake the notion of some nearby presence, but there's nobody here. Seems I'm safe for now; gotta inspect for salvage when all that's left is the present.

Grab my shield en route to the crash site. Paranoia commands attention to the Glitch for any signs of another incursion. Blazing scrolls melting ink curl into themselves like dying spiders guiding me to the edge. Peering over for any signs of the building proves useless, but a mangled branch gradients into view. It drills out of stone reaching toward the Spectacle sun for diluted photosynthesis; better than nothing, I guess. A page out of a book flaps against the wind

sheared between frayed twigs. Bending over isn't enough to reach, so I lay half off the edge. Seeing the tops of trees flips vertigo nausea from stomach to bile throat. Clumsy hands graze papyrus nearly knocking the page loose for oblivion to have, but not today. Concentrate; breathe, stretch every anatomical nuance until the words fit like a glove between my fingertips.

Triumphant, I stand and read:

He who dwelt not among tempests/Cannot strength true valor/Cannot realize how sweet
to/Man is struggle, toil and labor./He who dwelt not among tempests/Cannot know the grief of
weakness,/Cannot realize the torments,/Of compelled inaction's meekness./How I envy them
who know not/Any resting or reposing/Till exhaustion past man's bearing/For a moment
overthrows them./Day and night they watch as sentries,/Long the toil, short respite coming,/Day
and night they are at labor/Until hands and spines ache numbly./Then it seems to them that
surely

No worse torment comes to people .../Fighters, if you could but know it,/What it is when
hands are feeble!/What it is to lie, unmoving,/Like one shipwrecked by fate's dangers,/To
surrender to the mercy/And the strength and will of strangers;/What remains for such a creature?

But to think, to muse, to ponder/Then accept these thoughts, you fighters,/Nothing more

have I to offer.²

Wondering what words can offer me on the trek back to the pit, I notice the fire's due. Without another crumple-fisted thought the paper makes a good sacrifice. Embers envelop to feed the hearth sinking deep into smolder, but then cracks the sky with a deafening scream unlike anything I've ever heard.

² Ukrainka, Lesya. *Epilogue*, Poem, 1890.

Cowering hands-to-ears makes little difference. Multi-tonal howls supported by gnashing chants ritualistic in their rhythmic dimension penetrate through flesh. Instincts don't require solving unknowns to know violent intent. The gravity of my anxiety IV trickles urine down into the nook of my boots, warm, wet, and urgent, but my body betrays me immobile. Horror pulls my gaze heavensward. The horde screams gather, pulse, then shockwave break the lingering Glitch overhead giving way to a shredded arm to hand mass nemesis tearing through the fissure.

Before I yearn for courage an invisible force bellows from where the Spectacle floats. Under the sonic pressure of ancient tongues my eardrums rupture. Don't need them to watch the vantablack gateway above me start to waver and shrink. The chandelier colossus in the sky pulsates white light in an expanding outline of itself exuding a kind of tension, forcing my head bowed. When the radiance subsides I lift my gaze to witness a nightmare.

Behind the Glitch a monster stands the size of asteroids. Scaled malachite knees replace the view of the valley. Artillery cannons like skyscrapers spike out of iridescent tortoiseshell armor protecting a quadrupedal core. Spinal cord nervous systems centipede out of the cavity molding a metallic human skull crowned in dull light. Gears grate and whine over my static hearing loss as its jaws unhinge, but what rattles my bones is the autotune scream that follows. In one whipcracking motion the titan slings its head at the Glitch. My saving grace eats the portal then flatulates the void out its rear at a supersonic speed that has me gasping. Although far flung, the Glitch lands close enough to darken the horizon dooming some other place.

What new machination is this? Once upon a time I thought I was aware of what I didn't know like all foolish children. Tales as old as time cut new wounds as I wobble to my feet fresh out of adolescence. Can't seem to process a coherent thought; head throbs, smells like iron. But I

can step forward so I will take a stand. Partially deaf I fumble the words then shout, “I come in peace!”

Eyeless sockets snap to me. The creature shudders inward, mandibles quaking open, but there is no answer.

Cautious, I ask: “How did you do that?” No answer. “Do others exist?” No answer. In its absence conspiracy grows: Is this how the Garden survives?

A shrill telekinetic voice hijacks my thoughts to violate me from within: **R E T U R N
T O A R E A : B**

Nothing quite like feeling your underwear sag under new weight. At a loss for understanding I continue to shout back, “Where?”

The behemoth shifts its stance, each massive step disrupting the earth to align itself between me and the mountain boundary. There is no answer.

What can I do?

R E T U R N T O A R E A : B

Disturbed, I wonder: why?

R E T U R N T O A R E A : B - O R E L S E -

Funny how quick vague threats replace fear for aggression. Squeezing the shield’s grip tight I raise Father’s might. “Or else, what?”

There is no answer.

“Answer me!”

There is no answer.

Teeth bared I shut my eyes to stare right back. Thinking really hard without really thinking: or else, what?

The abhorrent skull hurtles forward to tower fifty feet above me: **THIS UNIT WILL ACTIVATE THE PRIME DIRECTIVES**

Different from its own spliced noise an old man's recorded voice continues: "First and foremost, the main thing is to strike them hard. Not just one painful hit, but so many that the price is unbearable."³ An engineered rasp more rotted than the last adds: "We must ensure they never return. The old will die and the young will forget."⁴

Rage burns every blooming question to ash defining the great line between us. "Move."

There is no answer, but I require none. The moment my foot slides forward vertebrae like scythes squiggle then crack, whipping its ten ton skull at my flank. Predictable. Adjusting my stance allows me to deflect what would otherwise kill on direct hit. Veering off course its mouth fills with boulders. Momentous momentum propels me forward. Sprinting thighs burn to blur as I race to close the distance. The snake's not done yet; spine-blades lash wildly in every direction slicing through my visor. Toprock footwork evades metal spindles aimed at my legs. Drop twist backspin into windmill kicks to parry slicing cutlass steel. Kip-up to my feet without a loss of drive and run, run, run to the edge of the plateau. Jumping I activate thrusters attached to the backplate of my greaves, launching me over the monster's carapace in the direct line of triple turret fire. Eighteen inch bullets sonic boom out of 46cm canons. Suspended in air, there's only time left to curl my body behind my shield to brace for impact.

First comes awareness, then confusion. Back flat against the earth, it takes every ounce of strength I've got to lift my head. Right eye won't open, but one's enough to register my condition. All that remains of my shield is the sash wrapped around a charred arm. Strangely, I only feel tired. Try to stand but my legs won't let me. The Spectacle's champion roars with its patron surveying their victory from the clouds. Swivel my neck to examine my surroundings.

³ Netanyahu, Benjamin. *Shortly after the Oslo Accords*. 2001.

⁴ Ben-Gurion, David. *Letter to Amos*. 1937.

Looks like I'm back where I started except now the pit's a human sized crater with me at the center. What few embers remain defy consequence like halos around me. I'm able to flip onto my stomach using my blackened stump as a fulcrum. The exertion's agonizing; wheezing turns to delirious laughter. Face to dirt, nostalgia reminds me of my pillow back home. Home, where one can sleep in peace. Peace, when one can sleep. Sleep, where dreams are not only dreams. Dream, when I sleep...sleep...sleep...

Vibrations from earth's iron core rumble up to the surface. At first they escape notice, but soon grow in baritone vigor like a warm embrace. Whispers like wisps escape through crevices luring me toward the source. Using a finger to puncture a hole through dirt I scratch, claw, and dig. The ground breaks, but I keep digging to hear a heartbeat drop through the earth like *thump*, *thump*, *thump*,

thump'ha,

Thunk,

thunk, *thunk*,

thunk'akh

Deeper: *Thrump*,

thrump, *thrump*,

Thrump'ha

Hmph,

hmp, *hmp*,

hmp'akh

Deeper:

Phk,

phk, *phk*,

phk'ha,

Kh,

kh, *kh*,

kh'akh

Our Mother chants:

Kegět'

Indábunisin'

dangûg

Bĩnes'iwug'

*Ekwa'yaweyân*⁵

⁵ "Surely along the length of my form the water birds will alight." White Earth, Leech Lake, and Red Lake nations Singer: Gegwe'djwe'binun', Ethnologist: Frances Densmore, Translation: Mary Warren English. 1907.

Open palms claw at dirt grasping a hilt that's hard like lightning. Upon my touch gold engravings shimmer *Caledfwlch* across the handle. Mother's chorus sings, incantations dragging me below as if magnetized by self-fulfilling prophecies. I'm sinking, falling, then suspended in zero gravity before the nucleus erupts. Mounting a platform I hurtle skyward towards endless blue.

Surface breached, arcing tidal waves of shooting stars attack, attack, attack our enemy byproduct. The creature retreats, but I do not chase. Ascending beyond it I stand among silhouettes riding the back of meteors. Scimitar raised, we aim even higher still.