

ON

HER

HIGH

HORSE

CHARLOTTE HIGGINS

A HORSE TROTTING THROUGH A LIBRARY: you wouldn't want that. It could get messy. Ditto: hounds on the hunt for knowledge through the reference section, tails held high, noses eager and trembling. Ditto: fish in the fiction shelves. They'd be quite at home in fact, among the Ali Smiths and the Jackie Kays, holding in their piscine brains the deep ancestral memory that sharks once swam through the salt lagoons of Bearsden. Maybe they know what's coming, maybe they are planning ahead for a future like the old flood that the Roman poet Ovid imagined, when dolphins darted through oak groves, and fish flicked through forests of elms.¹

Libraries are like woods, after all. Both are between worlds: portals to other places. They are zones in which you lose time, where you encounter enchantment and monsters. Both woods and libraries may be mazelike and treacherous, like the labyrinthine library in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, whose geography is utterly confounding. Libraries are territories not just of enlightenment and imagination, but also of discomfort, dislocation and even of threat. New knowledge may shake old certainties. "I think," wrote Jorge Luis Borges, "of the world's literature as a kind of forest, I mean it's tangled and it entangles us but it's growing... it's a living labyrinth, a living maze"²

Poems can be like woods, too. The melancholic epic, Virgil's *Aeneid*, is easy to enter, hard to navigate. It is full of tangled paths, deep-shaded trees, dark groves, and its favourite word is *umbra* – shadow. In the *Aeneid*, the ghosts of the dead who flock at the banks of Acheron are as numerous as the falling leaves in autumn forests³. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante's dark wood, his *selva oscura*, is a place of spiritual confusion but it is also where the narrator meets his guide, the poet Virgil, and where his great journey through Hell and Purgatory and Paradise begins. Let us imagine Dante's wood as Pollokshields Library, inhabited not by a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf, but a fish, a dog, a bat and a high horse.

Ah, the high horse: what would happen if we mounted and rode her? For the author Deborah Levy, a woman on her high horse is a magnificent thing. Let the woman be imperious, let her ride in glory, let her not be pulled down from her triumphant mount by the jealous throng! Sometimes the high horse is herself hard to control; you can tumble hard from a high horse. Nevertheless! The woman shall

mount undeterred, using all her skill and tact safely to guide her temperamental steed. Levy imagines a friend riding her high horse "down the North Circular to repair her smashed screen at Mr Cellfone"⁴ Let the high horse of glory be ridden too round the streets of Glasgow, no matter the banality of the task in hand!

Kate Davis' high horse is made of dictionaries. "You've swallowed the dictionary," people used to say to a child who used a long word, and it wasn't a compliment. This high horse has proudly swallowed many dictionaries, and has multisyllabic hearts and lungs; its kidneys are made from obscure acronyms and its hooves are shiny with shamelessly Latinate vocabulary. The high horse of dictionaries reminds me of the wooden horse at Troy – the great hollow horse that the Greeks left outside the city gates after they withdrew from their 10-year siege. But it was all a trick, a subterfuge. The Trojans believed the horse was an offering to the gods, and brought it inside the gates, celebrating their freedom. (Or rather, not all of them believed, but no one thought Cassandra was worth listening to.) Then, as they slept, Greek champions hidden inside the belly of the horse crept out, slit the throats of the guards at the gate, and let in the rest of the army, who hadn't sailed back to Greece at all.

"All narrative is a Trojan horse, What is hiding in its belly, and what is hiding in its mouth?" writes Levy. Which leaves me to wonder: what lurks in the belly of a high horse made of dictionaries? What lurks in its mouth?⁵

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.296.

² Richard Burgin (ed), *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*, University of Mississippi Press, Jackson, 1998.

³ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.309-10.

⁴ Deborah Levy, *Real Estate*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2022.

⁵ Deborah Levy, 'The Psychopathology of a Writing Life' in *The Position of Spoons*, Hamish Hamilton, London, forthcoming, 2024.

