

## Old Haunts

By Michelle Collier

“Welcome back,” you say, grinning at me over a chipped china mug. “How was London? Must be ages since you’ve been in here.” Your words topple out as we creak in our seats. My bones feel as old as the chairs.

“Too long,” I say. Mostly just to say something, anything at all. The library was once as familiar to me as my teenage bedroom. But today I am unmoored. Cut loose by too many years at sea, away from here. We sit in the reading room, like old times. But the room is a café now; a “new page in the library’s history” according to the posters that mask the areas still under renovation. It feels like a graveyard. A chipboard mausoleum adorned with cheap plastic flowers.

“I love the changes, don’t you?” you say, as if reading my thoughts. You always said I was an open book to you. Even after all this time it’s true. I stab at dry cheesecake with a dessert fork, catching its tips against the plate in a high-pitched squeal of metal on porcelain. Such a sound would’ve once reverberated around this place like a gunshot, ricocheting from angry stares and pursed lips. I cringe instinctively. But no-one looks over.

“I can still feel the old gods,” I say.

You smile. “Sure, if you look hard enough you can even see their footprints on the carpet. Lord knows there’s enough building dust in here.”

I laugh, but the books by the counter look like a hoard of angels, marching through the shaft of light that cuts in through a half boarded window. I can hear them singing, their chorus battling against the low hum of renovation works. It’s like we’re caught between worlds; a library in limbo.

My reverie is broken by the sound of tiny children stomping through the atrium. I must have frowned, because you say to me, “God, you’re a bloody gargoye”

“What do you mean?”

“Grimacing from the cloisters. Baying at the new blood! Get with it, Bea. The library is for everyone. Time moves on.”

But I was born at the library, I think. Gestated among its pages and pink check-out cards. Pushed out through a canal of Kipling and Keats into the startling light of day, a silent sob in my mouth. I feel the library’s wounds as if they were my own.

“Eat your cake, love, then I’ll show you how to FaceTime Darren on the computer doofers. That’ll be nice won’t it?”

You think I’m homesick for the south, but it’s this place I miss.

Over your shoulder the books leave their shelves, their dust covers flapping like wings.

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This short vignette was written as a piece of reflection on conversations had during my residency with Festival of Libraries, Manchester City of Literature.