

Freya Douglas-Morris: Hills of Honey

Arusha Gallery | Text by Anna Souter

It is morning and it is evening.

It is spring and it is autumn.

It is a beginning and it is an ending.

A distant sun hangs low in the sky, covered in a thick haze that makes it indistinguishable from the kind round face of the full moon. The hills are folded together like a wrinkled cloth, enclosing uncertainties in geological layers, repeatedly earthing and unearthing themselves like jewels in a sunlit casket. Rocking gently under the swaying clouds, the hills swaddle the valleys and the purple-shadowed trees and the little wooden houses in an embrace worn smooth and habitual by time.

She has been swimming under a drift of stars that might just as well have been the airy white bursts of seed heads floating on the dusty river surface. In the water, there is always a small firm seed of fear in the stomach, on the cusp of blossoming throughout the veins even as an intense calm descends. The peace of stillness in motion, pushing forward into the current running through and beyond the infinite folds of the body's surfaces. And always underneath the immense liquid quiet is the unease, the slippery discomfort of a shaft of bright sunlight that illuminates further darkneses in the depths.

Now with loosened limbs she is sitting and thinking, as her eyes fill with brine and her vision blurs. Still she puts off blinking a moment longer, lost in a daydream in the cradling arms of the foothills. A pair of swans drift past without her seeing, feet entangled in thin fronds.

She speaks aloud, 'The shadows are stretched out long tonight. Or did the night pass over as I swam? I can no longer tell east from west.'

Drops of water cling.

A bird sings unseen.

Light breaks upon the prismatic ripples of the lake in layers.

She sits hard-pressed between the future and the past, within the vivid stasis of a meeting point. She feels herself a vessel, overflowing with thoughts and intentions and the animacies of a world alive with meanings. Her hand takes the weight of her head and feels the pulse of memory beating slowly within the veins, and her clasped fist is full of the soft tendrils of a melancholy that also feels like happiness.

She remembers the closeness of bodies, an image of a woman kneeling at the side of a man, of a man walking at the side of a woman, their hands almost touching. They have been reading of devotion. Childhood love affairs with kisses stolen in secret behind the buddleia bush, or given freely in exchange for red flowers. A reunion among deserted dunes, the sand radiating residual heat into the chill blue air of the night. She whispers her memories aloud like a mother murmuring nonsense to a baby stirring fretfully in her swaying arms.

The insubstantial hills yield their solid pigments, colouring her vision and gleaming reflected in her eyes, even when her back is turned. In her dreams she circumnavigates a small town in an unknown countryside, where windows stare blank and dark from white houses pregnant with possibilities and emptinesses. She feels the shadowy forms of trees in the dark interiority of her own body.

Lost in memory, she falls freely in a curving parabola, in a child's fantasy of soaring safely to the earth from the highest branches of an intimately known tree. Even as she sits with her head in her clasping hand, she floats through air and water like a pale bird, quiet delight tinged with the swimmer's ancient fear of the unknown germinating deep in the shadowed folds of her belly. She sheds herself like autumn leaves, her body a little boat rocking in the midst of the sea spray.

And now she is a swan, paired with her mirror image in warm white feathers and then again and again in the cold bright clarity of the water. Now a dove with wings outstretched, carrying messages to the whispering river and the humming trees. The mountains slide and settle like coloured sand in a basin tipped from side to side, while the rhythmical beating of droplets on canvas weaves a harmony among the patterns of her thoughts.

The stained reflections of forests seep slowly into her meditations and she feels the light touch of the water's lyrical song. The landscape is discovering itself as her story unfolds through its many mysteries among the hills of honey. Tethered to the earth and to the moon's tidal drag, she is on the cusp of becoming something new. She sits, distilled, on the edge of transformation.

There are children hiding behind the curtains.

The rain clouds are gathering and they are parting.

It is a beginning and it is an ending.

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Written in response to a visit to Freya Douglas-Morris' studio, July 2021