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Opening Extract from...

Among Others

Written by Jo Walton

Published by Corsair

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Constable & Robinson Ltd
55–56 Russell Square
London WC1B 4HP
www.constablerobinson.com

Published in the US by Tor,
an imprint of Tom Doherty Associates LLC, New York, NY 10010, 2010

Published in this paperback edition in the UK by Corsair,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson, 2013

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A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication
Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-47210-653-7 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-47210-044-3 (ebook)

Printed and bound in the UK

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This is for all the libraries in the world,
and the librarians who sit there day after day
lending books to people.

Er' perrehnne.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven*

What one piece of advice would you give to your younger self, and at what age?

Any time between 10 and 25:

It's going to improve. Honest. There really are people out there that you will like and who will like you.

—Farah Mendlesohn, LiveJournal,
23rd May 2008



Thursday 1st May 1975

The Phurnacite factory in Abercwmboi killed all the trees for two miles around. We'd measured it on the mileometer. It looked like something from the depths of hell, black and looming with chimneys of flame, reflected in a dark pool that killed any bird or animal that drank from it. The smell was beyond description. We always wound up the car windows as tight as tight when we had to pass it, and tried to hold our breath, but Grampar said nobody could hold their breath that long, and he was right. There was sulphur in that smell, which was a hell chemical as everyone knew, and other, worse things, hot unnameable metals and rotten eggs.

My sister and I called it Mordor, and we'd never been there on our own before. We were ten years old. Even so, big as we were, as soon as we got off the bus and started looking at it we started holding hands.

It was dusk, and as we approached the factory loomed blacker and more terrible than ever. Six of the chimneys were alight; four belched out noxious smokes.

"Surely it is a device of the Enemy," I murmured.

Mor didn't want to play. "Do you really think this will work?"

"The fairies were sure of it," I said, as reassuringly as possible.

"I know, but sometimes I don't know how much they understand about the real world."

"Their world is real," I protested. "Just in a different way. At a different angle."

"Yes." She was still staring at the Phurnacite, which was getting bigger and scarier as we approached. "But I don't know how much they understand about the angle of the every day world. And this is definitely in that world. The trees are dead. There isn't a fairy for miles."

"That's why we're here," I said.

We came to the wire, three straggly strands, only the top one barbed. A sign on it read "No Unauthorised Admittance. Beware Guard Dogs." The gate was far around the other side, out of sight.

"Are there dogs?" she asked. Mor was afraid of dogs, and dogs knew it. Perfectly nice dogs who would play with me would rouse their hackles at her. My mother said it was a method people could use to tell us apart. It would have worked, too, but typically of her, it was both terrifyingly evil and just a little crazily impractical.

"No," I said.

"How do you know?"

"It would ruin everything if we go back now, after having

gone to all this trouble and come this far. Besides, it's a quest, and you can't give up on a quest because you're afraid of dogs. I don't know what the fairies would say. Think of all the things people on quests have to put up with." I knew this wasn't working. I squinted forward into the deepening dusk as I spoke. Her grip on my hand had tightened. "Besides, dogs are animals. Even trained guard dogs would try to drink the water, and then they'd die. If there really were dogs, there would be at least a few dog bodies at the side of the pool, and I don't see any. They're bluffing."

We crept below the wire, taking turns holding it up. The still pool was like old unpolished pewter, reflecting the chimney flames as unfaithful wavering streaks. There were lights below them, lights the evening shift worked by.

There was no vegetation here, not even dead trees. Cinders crunched underfoot, and clinker and slag threatened to turn our ankles. There seemed to be nothing alive but us. The star-points of windows on the hill opposite seemed ridiculously out of reach. We had a school friend who lived there, we had been to a party once, and noticed the smell, even inside the house. Her father worked at the plant. I wondered if he was inside now.

At the edge of the pool we stopped. It was completely still, without even the faintest movement of natural water. I dug in my pocket for the magic flower. "Have you got yours?"

"It's a bit crushed," she said, fishing it out. I looked at them. Mine was a bit crushed too. Never had what we were

doing seemed more childish and stupid than standing in the centre of that desolation by that dead pool holding a pair of crushed pimpernels the fairies had told us would kill the factory.

I couldn't think of anything appropriate to say. "Well, un, dai, tri!" I said, and on "Three" as always we cast the flowers forward into the leaden pool, where they vanished without even a ripple. Nothing whatsoever happened. Then a dog barked far away, and Mor turned and ran and I turned and pelted after her.

"Nothing happened," she said, when we were back on the road, having covered the distance back in less than a quarter of the time it had taken us as distance out.

"What did you expect?" I asked.

"The Phurnacite to fall and become a hallowed place," she said, in the most matter-of-fact tone imaginable. "Well, either that or huorns."

I hadn't thought of huorns, and I regretted them extremely. "I thought the flowers would dissolve and ripples would spread out and then it would crumble to ruin and the trees and ivy come swarming over it while we watched and the pool would become real water and a bird would come and drink from it and then the fairies would be there and thank us and take it for a palace."

"But nothing at all happened," she said, and sighed. "We'll have to tell them it didn't work tomorrow. Come on, are we going to walk home or wait for a bus?"

It had worked, though. The next day, the headline in the Aberdare *Leader* was "Phurnacite Plant Closing: Thousands of Jobs Lost."

I'm telling that part first because it's compact and concise and it makes sense, and a lot of the rest of this isn't that simple.

Think of this as a memoir. Think of it as one of those memoirs that's later discredited to everyone's horror because the writer lied and is revealed to be a different colour, gender, class and creed from the way they'd made everybody think. I have the opposite problem. I have to keep fighting to stop making myself sound more normal. Fiction's nice. Fiction lets you select and simplify. This isn't a nice story, and this isn't an easy story. But it is a story about fairies, so feel free to think of it as a fairy story. It's not like you'd believe it anyway.



Very Private.
This is NOT a vocab book!

Et haec, olim, meminisse iuvabit!

—Virgil, *The Aeneid*



Wednesday 5th September 1979

"And how nice it'll be for you," they said, "to be in the countryside. After coming from, well, such an industrialised place. The school's right out in the country, there'll be cows and grass and healthy air." They want to get rid of me. Sending me off to boarding school would do nicely, that way they can keep on pretending I didn't exist at all. They never looked right at me. They looked past me, or they sort of squinted at me. I wasn't the sort of relative they'd have put in for if they'd had any choice. *He* might have been looking, I don't know. I can't look straight at him. I kept darting little sideways glances at him, taking him in, his beard, the colour of his hair. Did he look like me? I couldn't tell.

There were three of them, his older sisters. I'd seen a photograph of them, much younger but their faces exactly the same, all dressed as bridesmaids and my Auntie Teg next to them looking as brown as a berry. My mother had been in the picture too, in her horrid pink wedding dress—pink because it was December and we were born the June after and she did have some shame—but *he* hadn't been. She'd torn

him off. She'd ripped or cut or burned him out of all the wedding pictures after he'd run off. I'd never seen a picture of him, not one. In L. M. Montgomery's *Jane of Lantern Hill*, a girl whose parents were divorced recognised a picture of her father in the paper without knowing it. After reading that we'd looked at some pictures, but they never did anything for us. To be honest, most of the time we hadn't thought about him much.

Even standing in his house I was almost surprised to find him real, him and his three bossy half-sisters who asked me to call them Aunt. "Not aunty," they said. "Aunty's common." So I called them Aunt. Their names are Anthea and Dorothy and Frederica, I know, as I know a lot of things, though some of them are lies. I can't trust anything my mother told me, not unless it's checked. Some things books can't check, though. It's no use my knowing their names anyway, because I can't tell them apart, so I don't call them aunt anything, just Aunt. They call me "Morwenna," very formally.

"Arlinghurst is one of the best girls' schools in the country," one of them said.

"We all went there," another chimed in.

"We had the jolliest time," the third finished. Spreading what they're saying out like that seems to be one of their habits.

I just stood there in front of the cold fireplace, looking up under my fringe and leaning on my cane. That was something else they didn't want to see. I saw pity in one of their faces

when I first got out of the car. I hate that. I'd have liked to sit down, but I wasn't going to say so. I can stand up much better now. I will get better, whatever the doctors said. I want to run so much sometimes my body aches with longing more than the pain from my leg.

I turned around to distract myself and looked at the fireplace. It was marble, very elaborate, and there were branches of copper birch leaves arranged in it. Everything was very clean, but not very comfortable. "So we'll get your uniforms right away, today in Shrewsbury, and take you down there tomorrow," they said. Tomorrow. They really can't wait to get rid of me, with my ugly Welsh accent and my limp and worst of all my inconvenient existence. I don't want to be here either. The problem is that I don't have anywhere else to be. They won't let you live alone until you're sixteen; I found that out in the Home. And he is my father even if I'd never seen him before. There is a sense in which these women really are my aunts. That makes me feel lonelier and further away from home than I ever had. I miss my real family, who have let me down.

The rest of the day was shopping, with all three aunts, but without him. I didn't know if I was glad or sorry about that. The Arlinghurst uniform had to come from special shops, just like my grammar school uniform did. We'd been so proud when we passed the Eleven Plus. The cream of the Valleys, they said we were. Now that's all gone, and instead they're forcing on me this posh boarding school with its strange re-

quirements. One of the aunts had a list, and we bought everything on it. They're certainly not hesitating about spending money. I've never had this much spent on me. Pity it's all so horrible. Lots of it is special games kits. I didn't say I won't be using them any time soon, or maybe ever. I keep turning away from that thought. All my childhood we had run. We'd won races. Most of the school races we'd been racing each other, leaving the rest of the field far behind. Grampar had talked about the Olympics, just dreaming, but he had mentioned it. There had never been twins at the Olympics, he said.

When it came to shoes, there was a problem. I let them buy hockey shoes and running shoes and daps, for gym, because either I can use them or not. But when it comes to the uniform shoes, for every day, I had to stop them. "I have a special shoe," I said, not looking at them. "It has a special sole. They have to be made, at the orthopaedic. I can't just buy them."

The shop assistant confirmed that we can't just buy them in the school pattern. She held up a school shoe. It was ugly, and not very different from the clumpy shoes I have. "Couldn't you walk in these?" one of the aunts asked.

I took the school shoe in my hands and looked at it. "No," I said, turning it over. "There's a heel, look." It was inarguable, though the school probably thinks the heel is the minimum any self-respecting teenage girl will wear.

They didn't mean to totally humiliate me as they clucked

over the shoes and me and my built-up sole. I had to remind myself of that as I stood there like a rock, a little painful half-smile on my face. They wanted to ask what's wrong with my leg, but I outfaced them and they didn't quite dare. This, and seeing it, cheered me up a little. They gave in on the shoes, and said the school would just have to understand. "It's not as if my shoes were red and glamorous," I said.

That was a mistake, because then they all stared at my shoes. They are cripple shoes. I had a choice of one pattern of ladies' cripple shoes, black or brown, and they are black. My cane's wooden. It used to belong to Grampar, who is still alive, who is in hospital, who is trying to get better. If he gets better, I might be able to go home. It's not likely, considering everything, but it's all the hope I have. I have my wooden key ring dangling from the zip of my cardigan. It's a slice of tree, with bark, it came from Pembrokeshire. I've had it since before. I touched it, to touch wood, and I saw them looking. I saw what they saw, a funny little spiky crippled teenager with a piece of tatty wood. But what they ought to see is two glowing confident children. I know what happened, but they don't, and they'd never understand it.

"You're very English," I said.

They smiled. Where I come from, "Saes" is an insult, a terrible fighting word, the worst thing you can possibly call someone. It means "English." But I am in England now.

We ate dinner around a table that would have been small for sixteen, but with a fifth place laid awkwardly for me.

Everything matched, the tablemats, the napkins, the plates. It couldn't be more different from home. The food was, as I'd expected, terrible—leathery meat and watery potatoes and some kind of green spear-shaped vegetable that tastes of grass. People have told me all my life that English food is awful, and it's reassuring that they were right. They talked about boarding schools, which they all went to. I know all about them. Not for nothing have I read Greyfriars and Malory Towers and the complete works of Angela Brazil.

After dinner, *he* asked me into his study. The aunts didn't look happy about it, but they didn't say anything. The study was a complete surprise, because it's full of books. From the rest of the house, I'd have expected neat old leatherbound editions of Dickens and Trollope and Hardy (Gramma loved Hardy), but instead the shelves are chockablock with paperbacks, and masses of them are SF. I actually relaxed for the first time in this house, for the first time in his presence, because if there are books perhaps it won't be all that bad.

There were other things in the room—chairs, a fireplace, a drinks tray, a record player—but I ignored or avoided them and walked as fast as I clumsily could to the SF shelf.

There was a whole load of Poul Anderson I haven't read. Stuffed on the top of the As there was Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonquest*, which looks as if it's the sequel to "Weyr Search" which I read in an anthology. On the shelf below there was a John Brunner I haven't read. Better than that, two John Brun-

ners, no, three John Brunners I haven't read. I felt my eyes start to swim.

I spent the summer practically bookless, with only what I took with me when I ran away from my mother—the three-volume paperback *Lord of the Rings*, of course, Ursula Le Guin's *The Wind's Twelve Quarters, Volume 2*, which I will defend against all comers as the best single author short story collection of all time, ever, and John Boyd's *The Last Starship from Earth*, which I'd been in the middle of at the time and which hadn't stood up to re-reading as much as one might hope. I have read, though I didn't bring it with me, Judith Kerr's *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, and the comparison between Anna bringing a new toy instead of the loved Pink Rabbit when they left the Third Reich has been uncomfortably with me whenever I've looked at the Boyd recently.

"Can I—" I started to ask.

"You can borrow any books you want, just take care of them and bring them back," he said. I snatched the Anderson, the McCaffrey, the Brunners. "What have you got?" he asked. I turned and showed him. We both looked at the books, not at each other.

"Have you read the first of these?" he asked, tapping the McCaffrey.

"Out of the library," I said. I have read the entire science fiction and fantasy collection of Aberdare library, from Anderson's *Ensign Flandry* to Roger Zelazny's *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, an odd thing to end on, and one I'm still not certain about.

"Have you read any Delany?" he asked. He poured himself a whisky and sipped it. It smelled weird, horrible.

I shook my head. He handed me an Ace Double, one half of it *Empire Star* by Samuel R. Delany. I turned it over to look at the other half, but he tutted impatiently, and I actually looked at him for a moment.

"The other half's just rubbish," he says, dismissively, stubbing out a cigarette with unnecessary force. "How about Vonnegut?"

I have read the complete works of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., to date. Some of it I have read standing up in Lears bookshop in Cardiff. *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* is very strange, but *Cat's Cradle* is one of the best things I've ever read. "Oh yes," I said.

"What Vonnegut?"

"All of it," I said, confidently.

"*Cat's Cradle*?"

"*Breakfast of Champions*, *Welcome to the Monkey House* . . ." I reeled off the titles. He was smiling. He looked pleased. My reading has been solace and addiction but nobody has been pleased with me for it before.

"How about *The Sirens of Titan*?" he asked, as I wound down.

I shook my head. "I've never heard of it!"

He set down his drink, bent down and got the book, hardly looking at the shelves, and added it to my pile. "How about Zenna Henderson?"

"*Pilgrimage*," I breathed. It is a book that speaks to me. I love it. Nobody else I've met has ever read it. I didn't read it from the library. My mother had it, an American edition with a hole punched in the cover. I don't even think there is a British edition. Henderson wasn't in the library catalogue. For the first time, I realised that if he is my father, which in some sense he is, then long ago he *knew* her. He married her. He had the sequel to *Pilgrimage* and two collections. I took them, very uncertain of him. I could hardly hold my book pile one-handed. I put them all in my bag, which was on my shoulder, where it always is.

"I think I'll go to bed and read now," I said.

He smiled. He has a nice smile, nothing like our smiles. I've been told all my life that we looked like him, but I can't see it. If he's Lazarus Long to our Laz and Lor, I'd expect to have some sense of recognition. We never looked anything like anyone in our family, but apart from the eye and hair colour I don't see anything. It doesn't matter. I have books, new books, and I can bear anything as long as there are books.



Thursday 6th September 1979

My father drove me to school. In the back seat was a neat suitcase I never saw before, in which, one of the aunts

assured me, was all the uniform, neatly laid out. There was also a leather satchel, which she said is school supplies. Neither of them were scuffed at all, and I think they must be new. They must have cost the earth. My own bag held what it had held since I ran away, plus the books I have borrowed. I clutched it tightly and resisted their attempts to take it from me and put it with the luggage. I nodded at them, my tongue frozen in my mouth. It's funny how impossible it would be to cry, or show any strong emotion, with these people. They are not my people. They are not like my people. That sounded like the first lines of a poem, and I itched to write them down in my notebook. I got into the car, awkwardly. It was painful. At least there was room to straighten my leg once I was in. Front seats are better than back seats, I've noticed that before.

I managed to say thank you as well as goodbye. The aunts each kissed me on the cheek.

My father didn't look at me as he drove, which meant I could look at him, sideways. He was smoking, lighting each cigarette with the butt of the last, just like her. I wound down my window to have some air. I still don't think he looks the least bit like us. It isn't just the beard. I wondered what Mor would have made of him, and pushed the thought away hard. After a little while he said, puffing, "I've put you down as Markova."

It's his name. Daniel Markova. I've always known that. It's the name on my birth certificate. He was married to my

mother. It's her name. But I've never used it. My family name is Phelps, and that's how I've gone to school. Phelps means something, at least in Aberdare, it means my grandparents, my family. Mrs. Markova means that madwoman my mother. Still, it will mean nothing to Arlinghurst.

"Morwenna Markova is a bit of a mouthful," I said, after rather too long.

He laughed. "I said that when you were born. Morwenna and Morganna."

"She said you chose the names," I said, not very loudly, staring out of the open window at the moving patchwork of flat fields full of growing things. Some of them are stubble and some of them have been ploughed.

"I suppose I did," he said. "She had all those lists and she made me choose. They were all very long, and very Welsh. I said it would be a mouthful, but she said people would soon shorten it. Did they?"

"Yes," I said, still staring out. "Mo, or Mor. Or Mori." Mori Phelps is the name I will use when I am a famous poet. It's what I write inside my books now. Ex libris Mori Phelps. And what has Mori Phelps to do with Morwenna Markova and what's likely to happen to her in a new school? I will laugh about this one day, I told myself. I will laugh about it with people so clever and sophisticated I can't imagine them properly now.

"And did they call your sister Mog?" he asked.

He hadn't asked me about her before. I shook my head,

then realised he was driving and not looking at me. "No," I said. "Mo, or Mor, both of us."

"But how could they tell you apart?" He wasn't looking at all, he was lighting another cigarette.

"They couldn't." I smiled to myself.

"You won't mind being Markova at school?"

"I don't care. And anyway, you're paying for it," I said.

He turned his head and looked at me for a second, then back to the road. "My sisters are paying for it," he said. "I don't have any money except what they allow me. Do you know my family situation?"

What is there to know? I knew nothing about him apart from the fact that he was English, which has caused me no end of playground fights, and that he married my mother when he was nineteen and then ran off two years later when she was in hospital having another baby, a baby that died because of the shock. "No," I said.

"My mother was married to a man named Charles Bartleby. He was quite wealthy. They had three daughters. Then the war came. He went off to fight in France in 1940 and was captured there and put in a prisoner of war camp. My mother left my three little sisters with their grandmother Bartleby, in the Old Hall, the house we've just left. She went to work in an RAF canteen, to do what she could for the war effort. There she met and fell in love with a Polish flying officer called Samuel Markova. He was a Jew. I was born in March 1944. In September 1944 Bartleby was liberated from

the camp and came home to England, where he and my mother obtained a divorce. She married my father, who had just learned that his entire family in Poland had been killed."

Had he had a wife and children too? I felt sure he had. A Polish Jew! I am part Polish. Part Jewish? All that I know about Judaism comes from *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *Dying Inside*. Well, and the Bible, I suppose.

"My mother had some money of her own, but not very much. My father left the RAF after the war and worked in a factory in Ironbridge. Bartleby left his money, and his house, to my sisters. When I was thirteen my mother died in an accident. My sisters, who were grown up by then, came to her funeral. Anthea offered to pay to send me to school, and my father accepted. They've been subsidising me ever since. As you know, I married partway through university."

"What happened to Bartleby?" I asked. He couldn't have been much older than my grandfather.

"He shot himself when the girls turned twenty-one," he said, in a tone of voice that closed off further questions.

"What do you . . . do?" I asked.

"They hold the purse-strings, but I manage the estate," he said. He dropped the butt of a cigarette into the ash tray, which was overflowing. "They pay me a salary, and I live at the house. Very Victorian really."

"Have you lived there ever since you ran off?" I asked.

"Yes."

"But they said they didn't know where you were. My

grandfather went there and talked to them, all this way." I was indignant.

"They lied." He wasn't looking at me at all. "Did it bother you so much that I ran away?"

"I've run away from her too," I said, which didn't answer his question but seemed to be enough.

"I knew your grandparents would look after you," he said.

"They did," I said. "You needn't have worried about that."

"Ah," he said.

So then I realised guiltily how my very presence in his car was actually a huge reproach. For one thing, there is only one of me, when he abandoned twins. For another, I am crippled. Thirdly, I am there at all; I ran away. I had to ask for his help—and worse, I had to use the social services to ask for his help. Clearly, the arrangements he made for us were far from adequate. In fact, my existence there at that moment demonstrated to him that he is a rotten parent. And, truth be told, he is. My mother notwithstanding, running out on babies isn't an acceptable thing to do—and in fact, as an abstraction, abandoning babies with her is particularly and unusually irresponsible. But I have run away from her too.

"I wouldn't have grown up any other way," I said. My grandparents. The Valleys. Home. "Truly. There was so much about it to love. I couldn't have had a better childhood."

"I'll take you to meet my father soon, perhaps at half term," he said. He was signalling to turn, and we turned between two elms, both dying, and onto a gravel drive that

crunched under the car wheels. It was Arlinghurst. We had arrived.

The first thing that happened in school was the fight about chemistry. It's a big gracious house in its own grounds, looking stately and Victorian. But the place smells like a school—chalk, boiled cabbage, disinfectant, sweat. The headmistress was well-mannered and distant. She didn't give my father permission to smoke, which wrong-footed him. Her chairs are too low. I had trouble getting out of mine. But none of that would matter if it wasn't for the timetable she handed me. First, there are three hours of games every day. Second, art and religious education are compulsory. Third, I can have either chemistry or French, and either Latin or biology. The other choices were very simple, like physics or economics, and history or music.

Robert Heinlein says in *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel* that the only things worth studying are history, languages, and science. Actually, he adds maths, but honestly they left out the mathematical part of my brain. Mor got all the maths. Having said that, it was the same for both of us: We either understood it instantly or you might as well have used a drill to get it into our heads. "How can you understand Boolean algebra when you still have problems with the concept of long division?" my maths teacher had asked in despair. But Venn diagrams are easy, while long division remains challenging. Hardest of all were those problems about people doing incomprehensible things with no motivation. I was inclined to drift away

from the sum to wonder why people would care what time two trains passed each other (spies), be so picky about seating arrangements (recently divorced people), or—which to this day remains incomprehensible—run the bath with no plug in.

History, languages and science pose me no such problems. When you need to use maths in science, it always makes sense, and besides, they let you use a calculator.

"I need to do both Latin and biology, and both French and chemistry," I said, looking up from the timetable. "But I don't need to do art or religious education, so it'll be easy to rearrange."

The headmistress went through the roof at this, because clearly timetables are sacred or something. I didn't listen all that much. "There are over five hundred girls in this school, do you propose I inconvenience them all to accommodate you?"

My father, who has no doubt also read Heinlein, backed me up. I'll take Heinlein over a headmistress any day. Eventually we ended up with a compromise in which I'll surrender biology if I get to take all three of the others, which can be arranged with a little shuffling between classes. I'll take chemistry with a different class, but I don't care about that. It felt like enough of a victory for now, and I consented to be shown my dorm and meet my housemistress and "new friends."

My father kissed my cheek when he said goodbye. I watched him out of the front door and saw him lighting a cigarette the second he was in the open air.