

HELEN FREEMAN

Poet Helen Freeman also spent her childhood in East Africa where her parents worked in the Turkana desert area of Kenya. She boarded for secondary school in England where she met Diane Rendle.

After several years of teaching in Kenya, Tanzania and the Middle East, she now lives in Durham.

Writing poetry really started whilst recovering from a severe road traffic accident in Oman.

Helen has been published in several online magazines and supplements, details of which can be seen on her Instagram page. @chemchemi.hf

POEMS

“You Do Not Know What You Will Encounter”

When the leopard whispers to the woman,
he says, *There's a hurricane coming,*
wrap up, hunker down, hide yourself.

She says, *But I'm strong enough,*
and unwinds her Kanga

Burden-Bearer ("Don't Carry the World on Your Head")

On the village path, People like me say, Take the shot. Who cares if sweat is seeping through and smiles fade?

People like me have no-good brothers or absent sisters, cousins who don't even know how to make tea.

People like me hide beneath layers – and sacks and tins and bowls and packs they need not carry and some they definitely shouldn't.

People like me never ask for help, their mouths glued mute from too much othering.

People like me lost their parents long ago, even if they see them every day.

People like me do not spend hours getting Dutch braids, fishtails, herringbones, corn rows or painting their nails cerise.

People like me bear weights of more than double their height that become their whole horizon.

Spot the hangdog leopard. People like me get used to his low growl at their heels and don't drive him away.

The Guinea Fowl Object
("The Belly of a Woman is Like a Garden")

Eh? You tink you can use our nest?
You roost here where we police?
Eat our maggots? Steal our ticks?

You lie there so lazy, your head
as massive as a jackfruit,
with dat plain white crest

and your mud-brown rawness.
What is dat smell? Milk? Coconut?
And what tree has flamingo bark?

Where are your other eggs?
No cluster? No mate? This is no place
to stow away by yourself

with your noiseless breath
and your belly kicking.
Where is your zest woman?

And what are dese flowers
on your body? Tasteless. Dead.
Dis softness on your beak?

Dis lack of feathers? You are not
allowed to lay here. Fly away.
Dis be our garden. Shoo.

“The Sun Never Goes Down Without Some Happenings”

Sedge grass purrs,
crickets trill and whistle,
the track meanders
through shrubs and knolls
under sundown’s saffron shade
and he’s nearly home.
Twilight percolates.

The moon’s already full,
white like his kofia,
guiding his steps
back to her embrace.

He’s in his favourite kanzu,
last worn at his son’s wedding
when his wife had whispered
You look good enough to eat.
He chuckles and recalls
his brother comparing him
to a giant salamander.

The fronds mutter
and creak as the breeze
picks up and he wades through
the stream. His mind flashes:

his wife waddling up waving
bank notes, warbling joy
at their son’s reception;
his boss today, in his face,
reeking of curried kebab –
shreds still stuck in his canines –
telling him to raise his game,

to focus; her brawny black
neck and lustrous hair,
the nuzzle at his ear,
the close breath.

Pet Rooster Put in Place
("A Country Rooster Would Not Crow Whilst in Town")

He's the one allowed
to cosy up on your pink silks,
surf the black and white waves
of all your moods and scan
every perimeter from the tip
of your carved bed frame.
He loves to elongate his neck
like yours, then shake his wattle
and gargle his phlegm.

You're thankful he never crows
but you really ought to ruminate
over how you'll handle home-life
when he hooks a bantam or two
or you adopt a tiny kitten.
How will you prevent back-biting
and hackle-rising? How will he
maintain those spurs?
If you keep squawking

about Inappropriate Aggression
and the Necessity of Limitations,
coop him up in chicken wire –
even though your shining halo
is all he's ever seen, bantams
aside – his rage is bound to escalate.
Isolate him in a concrete yard
with jackal heckles and his pride
will get stuck forever in his craw.