

FICTION



Genevieve BURLEY

***IN LIEU OF FOREWORD
A FABLE***

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E-mail: gen.burley@gmail.com

The author of the fable published below is Genevieve Burley, an Australian writer and former lawyer with a masters in law from Cambridge University. She is now retraining as a sociologist at the University of Tasmania. In her spare time, she writes for the university's student magazine and for the *Medium* publication *An Injustice!*

I had the pleasure of meeting Gen at Cambridge when I was a PhD candidate doing research on metaphors for language in the work of Herta Müller. Gen is an open-minded, imaginative, empathetic and thoughtful interlocutor and correspondent, with whom I have discussed literature, art and culture, social issues, and politics. At the time, she was reading for her masters in law. Later Gen moved to London and briefly pursued a legal career, engaging with the issues of intellectual property. Her heart, however, was not in it, and eventually

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she quit her prestigious job. She says that her decision to give up law received little social approval, but she believed that the world didn't need more corporate lawyers. Increasingly detached from her values and struggling to see the direct social utility in what she was doing, Gen felt a building pressure in favour of moving on, which also told her to sort out the details later. After her return to Australia, she took interest in creative writing and then turned to sociology. She says that sociology could become her profession: "I'm attracted to sociology because it encourages empathy, understanding, and respect for others. It can also be quite visionary. Sociologists strive to see the world how it is and how we wish it would be".

The fable published here grew out of Burley's interest in the work of American anthropologist and anarchist activist David Graeber (1961–2020). As Genevieve was reading Graeber's book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011), which examines the historical relationship between debt and social institutions, she was thinking about "how globalisation, in its present form, facilitates the free flow of capital across state borders, but not so much the free movement of people. As Graeber argues, our societies are structured around wealth creation. A curious choice".

The author says she was also "thinking about belief systems and how those with power make claims about what is inevitable or natural – the 'way things work'. Ultimately, the girl in the fable must be able to articulate a belief in order to reject it. The ease with which the wall dissolves represents the ability to drop a paradigm in an instant: something both easy and exceedingly difficult to do. This opens up new possibilities, a bigger world. The example of the turtle shows how fear can be transformed into curiosity." Using the fable format, Burley wanted "to strip the beliefs found in Graeber's book back to bare essentials and to present the options more starkly". I think her effort is charitable and persuasive: the fable makes Graeber's insights emotionally and intellectually accessible while encouraging readers to interpret the story for themselves.



For *Astraea*, Genevieve Burley kindly agreed to answer a couple of questions.

Can fiction help people change reality?

Yes, I believe so. We resonate with the stories we read – they may contain something that rings true or is impactful, striking, imaginative, or inspiring. This can help change reality because we are worked on by what we resonate with. We are not forced to accept anything, rather there is a gentle reworking of the way that we are in the world and how we see things. We take things from stories to enfold into our worldview.

In your fable you mention that the girl used to be part of the web? How important is a sense of connection to you?

Connection is hugely important to me.

Technically we are part of a web of interconnectedness all the time; it is our awareness of that which changes. Today, that awareness has been weakened by neoliberal ideologies that shift responsibility to individuals to solve their own problems – this is problematic because some of the biggest challenges facing us today are socially produced.

A sense of disconnection also legitimates all manner of destruction. For example, if I understand that I live in a relational ecosystem, I recognise that to harm others is to harm myself. I work in harmony with the other-than-human world. I take only what I need. But if I am maximising self-interest, and I believe that the world is there for exploitation, I might raze a rainforest to the ground for profit.

Why is building walls such a divisive and problematic solution to social problems?

Walls become obstacles to larger-scale cooperation; we lose sight of the common good. They also enable “othering,” which makes violence more acceptable. And they make us feel more alone.

In the fable, the girl is not alone in her wish to tear down the walls.

Pavlo Shopin, PhD in German,
Associate Professor in the Department
of Applied Language Studies,
Comparative Linguistics and Translation,
Mykhailo Drahomanov State University (Ukraine)

A Fable

In the beginning, the girl was a part of a web.

This girl loved her web, which invisibly connected her to everyone and everything.

One day, she met some people. They were running away from something terrible. “But what?” she asked. They did not know. It was shapeless, formless. It must be terrible.

The girl thought she could see this thing too. A big blot on the horizon. Lumbering closer. The people were right. It must be terrible.

There was just one thing to do. The girl cut herself down from the web, and she hid in a forest.

She looked out again at the horizon and found the blot, which was a distant smudge.

No, it was lumbering closer.

So, the girl built a wall.

This was hard work. She had to coax the stones into neat rows and tidy stacks.

But it is in the nature of walls to grow, and this one grew fast. The blot disappeared from sight. The wall grew higher. It gobbled other sights and other sounds. When it was finally finished, there was nothing left for the girl but a



world which was small.

“Not small, but pleasant,” thought the girl. “I will be safe here.”

The girl made the forest her home and settled into her days. She forgot the wall but did not forget to avoid it.

One day, a big black bird flew across the wall and landed beside the girl. The girl felt uneasy.

Then the bird began to speak. It spoke in melody, the words flowing smoothly and swiftly.

The bird sang of other worlds behind walls. It sang of its humble service, flying things over the walls to the people that needed them most. In exchange for its troubles, it required only a debt.

The girl was eager to meet others and to share with them. She asked:

“How can I get to know those behind walls?”

“No,” said the bird. “This is a bad idea. You see, in order to get what you want, somebody else needs to give something up.

“I will tell you a secret that everybody else already knows. Truly being safe requires more than a wall. It requires things. Gather a big pile of things which have value. If your pile has higher value than that of others, then you are doing well.

“To gather that pile,” the bird continued, “you don’t need to make friends. Friendship makes it harder to get the best value from things. You only need me. And where walls are, so I will always be.”

The girl had more questions to ask, but she stayed silent. Her questions were clumsy. What did she know of other worlds behind walls? She had a memory of connection, but connection could not be valued or traded. How then, could it be worth anything?

The girl and the bird started to trade and many weeks passed. The girl’s debt grew when she received something from the bird. It shrank when she could offer the bird something that others valued. It became a game that they played, seeing how her debt would grow and shrink and grow again.

Life settled into a new rhythm which felt inevitable. The girl's questions dried up as she realised that she was creating value. She looked at the forest with new eyes, finding items to sell and information to use.

Then something remarkable happened.

The girl met a boy. He appeared one day, just like that, with scratched knees and tangled hair.

"Hullo," he said.

"Um, hi," the girl responded, taken aback. "How on walled earth did you get here?"

"You will never believe it," said the boy. "But it turns out that walls are made of individual stones. I convinced some of them to move aside to let me through. It's tricky and you have to move fast, but sometimes the stones forget that they are a wall."

The girl was irritated at her wayward wall. And yet...it felt so good to talk to somebody.

The girl and the boy became friends over the following weeks, sharing stories and adventures in the forest. They ate the wild berries from the boy's land and walked along the great rivers of her land.

One day, the girl and the boy were walking together. The boy was imitating a chicken that had chased him back home, and the girl was laughing at him. He started to laugh too.

"Stop!" the girl said, suddenly concerned. "If you laugh, you will take my laughter away. This is the way things work. There is only give and take."

The boy nodded seriously and walked into a low-hanging tree branch. Composure in this case was impossible. They both fell to the ground laughing. Their laughter expanded, soaring high and bouncing off rocks and trees. How strange, the girl thought after. That something shared can grow.

But one day the boy was not inclined to laugh. He looked sad.

He told her that he came from a land that needed water. The walls had halted the flow of the river. His people had asked for the assistance of the bird,



but it had refused; his home had nothing of value and their debt was too big.

The girl looked at her friend and over the day kept company with his sadness. When he left, she told him not to worry. She had a plan.

When the bird next came to visit, the girl told him of the surplus water which she had.

“What an opportunity,” she said. “Surely somebody else needs it.” She told the bird that she had so much that she was willing to give it away.

She added something she thought the bird might like: “Perhaps this could pave the way for future good deals.”

The bird narrowed its eyes.

“You might have plenty,” it said, “but others do not. This means that it has value.”

“I don’t mind,” the girl said, “just give it to the people who need it.”

“No,” the bird said. “I do not deal in gifts. There can only be exchange.”

The girl could see that the bird would not help her give away water for free. She sighed and then casually mentioned that she was desperate for some berries and would happily go into any debt for it. Debt which could be paid for with the water.

The bird’s eyes lit up.

A few days later, the bird returned with berries. It told her that an ingenious settlement had started a crop and were growing a multitude of the popular fruit. The girl’s heart sank for she knew that the boy’s land had no crops, just wilderness.

The bird looked at her curiously.

“Well, if you are not pleased with that, I have some good news for you. I found a buyer for your water.”

The girl’s heart leaped.

“This buyer is going to change the walled worlds,” the bird said. “They are going to use the water to build the walls higher. And in time, build more walls.”

This will help the walls remember that they cannot move.”

“Water for walls?” said the girl.

She thought about how the walls were creating lack. Of how the bird spoke of exchange and value with the fervour of worship. But this was a religion which crowded out connection. Connection which she had lost through fear but had found again with the boy. Connection which she had observed to grow in the presence of laughter, love and beauty.

And what, ultimately, was the point of the exchange offered by the bird? It was a hollow safety purchased at the expense of viewing the entire world as a flat place containing things, some of which had value and others which had none. There was no web here.

“No,” she said slowly to the bird, “I will not agree to that. You speak of service, but what service is there in denying people what they need and taking away their ability to meet their own needs?”

“In fact,” she said decisively, “we are done. I don’t want anything you have, and I don’t like anything you believe.”

“Silly girl,” the bird hissed. “You truly understand nothing of how things work. You need me. The walls keep you safe and I keep the walls. This is the only way that everybody gets to live in comfort. (Well, those that create value anyway. And these are the only ones that matter.)”

“No,” shouted the girl at the bird, suddenly angry at its audacity in deciding how things should be. Startled and affronted, the bird flew away. The wall gave a lurch.

The wall gave a lurch? The girl looked in amazement at the wall.

“No,” she said, this time in a whisper. The wall swayed, and the girl stared.

The girl walked to the wall and pressed against it with both hands. This time, she said yes. To fear, to friendship, to everything.

The mighty wall gave a sigh and dissolved on the wind, as sand. As quickly and easily as that, the girl saw the world anew.

Some days later, the girl and the boy were sitting in the sun. They looked out at a world which was big. At the water which was free to meander on a winding path, greeting anybody who did not want a wall.

In the distance, they saw the blot.

“You know,” said the girl, “if you squint it almost looks like a giant flying turtle.”

“Well,” replied the boy, “that would be worth seeing.”

“Yes,” said the girl.

THE END.

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