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Sudden Traveller by Sarah Hall — a feral collection

To enter into a world created by Sarah Hall is to step into a landscape that is feral and alive. Nature — including human nature — is not always benign. The stories in *Sudden Traveller*, as with Hall's previous two collections, prod the polarities between civility and animal instinct. Danger stalks the hinterland, and yet there is freedom to be found in re-wilding. In "Orton", a woman returns to the site of the most memorable sexual encounter of her youth to switch off the heart implant that is keeping her alive on "borrowed days". The opening sentence of the titular story, shortlisted for the BBC National Short Story Award 2018, takes no prisoners: "You breastfeed the baby in the car, while your father and brother work in the cemetery. They are clearing the drains of leaves and silt, so your mother can be buried." Here we have it: life, death, debris.

Hall, who herself had a child and lost her mother in short succession, externalises the interior landscape of grief, pitting her protagonist against diluvial downpours: "November storms have brought more rain than the valley has ever seen . . . The river has become a lake; it has breached the banks, spanned the valley's sides. And still the uplands weep." Reminiscent of her award-winning story "Mrs Fox", this collection's opening tale, "M", features a modern metamorphosis. In "the hour between prayers" a lawyer defending a women's shelter by day unzips "as if sutures are being unstrung" to reveal a hybrid winged creature within, "so evolved and lethal it might free the earth's hold on the moon". A superheroine for our times, M circles the city offering reprieve to women who have suffered abuse by "resetting, if not restoring" their bodies, gradually progressing to taking vengeance on perpetrators. "Who Pays?" also concerns women who take action to protect themselves, this time in the form of a fairy tale set in a Turkish forest. As the geographic settings vary, Hall also explores internal terrain. In "The Woman The Book Read", a man confronts his past when the daughter of a former girlfriend returns to his seaside town in Turkey as a tourist. "After Ara had left, everything had felt lesser, or greater. The rain. The politics. Regret. Abandonment seemed like a doorway that became a corridor of doorways, easy to pass through." "The Grotesques" follows the thoughts of a woman who struggles with social conventions as she prepares for a party and has an awkward encounter with the town vagrant, with dramatic after-effects.

The collection ends with "Live That You May Live", a nested narrative challenging the tales traditionally told to girls. In a Guardian article describing her writing day, Hall wrote that the morning ritual with her young daughter includes a "pre-dawn

literary analysis” involving “the alarming dearth of female protagonists who solve their own problems in children’s fiction”. Here a mother crafts an alternative bedtime story, in which a girl is also a sudden traveller, escaping the confines of the inherited canon — “she knew that she was made of roads; she knew that moving was her spirit”. The mother comes to the realisation, however, that her daughter’s story is ultimately her own to write: “She is not mine. She is of what I cannot know. Unmade. Ready.” At a slim 124 pages, the seven stories in *Sudden Traveller* merit savouring slowly: several of them reward rereading.

Hall’s prose is briny and sensual — unsurprising, perhaps, from an author who describes the process of writing as “physical, tactile almost”. Her lyricism — “the sea is black, bladed, strung with small lights” — reveals the influence of James Salter, but it’s a voice, fierce and unapologetic, uniquely her own. Despite the accolades for her five novels, including two Booker prize nominations, Hall has said that she is most proud of her short stories — “art reduced into something more pure”. Teetering on a precipice of menace, the stories in this collection don’t seek to offer easy answers, only some solace in a shared human condition: “We are, all of us, sudden travellers in the world, blind, passing each other, reaching out, missing, sometimes taking hold,” Hall writes in “*Sudden Traveller*”. “But . . . after the darkness, the loss, the loneliness, someone is going to take your hand and tell a story . . . The story will feel so familiar to you. You will begin to understand that those who suffer, suffer the same. In this condition, we are never alone.”

***Sudden Traveller*, by Sarah Hall, Faber, RRP£12.99, 124 pages**

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