

She says something about bad feminism before I turn the recorder on. I tell her that I should really record more conversations; that good writing can come out of recording and transcribing. She says she thought I did that already.

It's October, and Marianna has just got back from a trip to Northern Albania, where she filmed scenes for her new work, currently titled *BLOOD*. Everything was precisely storyboarded but it all fell apart when she got there. Well, kind of. 'I mean, my version of falling apart probably isn't the same as everyone else's,' she says.

*BLOOD* features Isabel, a ten-year-old girl, and Lali, an Albanian *burrnesha*, or 'sworn virgin.'

We talk in her studio for a while. She skips through the edit on her laptop but the playback is fucking around. Lali and Isabel are outside, standing in the wet. The young girl asks the old woman, who has lived as a man her whole adult life, a question: Why do you have to be a virgin to be a man?

We skip through the timeline to a lunch scene. Men sit round a table. Lali has taken Isabel in as her guest, but Isabel has run away. Marianna asks them to start the scene again. One of the men starts talking in Albanian (the subtitles are currently rough estimations): Where is the girl?

Lali responds: The girl is in the tower. She tired me out.

She is part of the family. You should forgive her.

The men keep saying the word *besa*, among all the other words I wouldn't be able to understand without the subtitles. *Besa* is an untranslatable word, meaning – 'I'll try but it's not possible' – at times loyalty, honour, promise and truce. According to Marianna, you can give someone your *besa* and you can be in someone's *besa*.

*Besa* is integral to the Kanun, an oral code of conduct established by Lekë Dukagjini in the 14th century. The Kanun is patrilineal: only men can inherit and buy land; only men can smoke, or own a gun; a woman is worth half a man. You can't kill a man when he's with a woman. As her guest, Isabel is in Lali's *besa*. If anything should happen to Isabel, Lali is obliged to revenge on her behalf: *she is part of the family*. Lali honours *besa* as if it was a kind of law.

'It's just so conflicted,' says Marianna. 'They see it (the Kanun) as part of the olden days. At the same time they are subsumed within this Albanian identity that they just want to keep hold of.' She starts laughing. She laughs several times during our first conversation, not because what she's talking about is conventionally funny, but because it's so hard to get to grips with, the law of this strange land, its traditions and customs. Laughter seems like a totally appropriate way of expressing this strangeness, overcoming it. I think of Catherine Clement writing on Medusa's laugh in *The Newly Born Woman*, the way 'Laughter breaks up, breaks out, splashes over;' 'petrifying and shattering constraint.'

Albania shares its Southern border with Greece and its Northern border with Montenegro and Kosovo. The North is mountainous and wet (there was torrential rain during their shoot). It is also notoriously isolated. Anthropologist Michael L. Galaty describes Northern Albania

as a 'negotiated periphery,' a place where individuals and groups have actively created and manipulated regional and national histories for their own empowerment. He writes: Northern Albania is the only place in Europe where so-called tribal societies – with tribal chiefs and councils, blood feuds, an oral customary law code, etc. – survived into the twentieth century.

Blood feuds are about taking an eye for an eye. 'It's ritualistic,' says Marianna. 'It's about death and blood, but it's also seen as preservation of who you are: it's an imperative.'

According to the Kanun, breaking *besa* means two lives for one.

She skips through to later scenes: 'That's her getting the gauze pulled out of her nose,' she says. 'That's the tower in the distance.' A dog is barking.

I remember Marianna describing us as 'strange friends,' her and me. Criticism can grow through and out of a strange kind of friendship, love, or even desire. Conflict is an inherent part of a kind of intimacy, an irreconcilable distance, which is also a closeness: a familiar estrangement.

'That's the inferior turbinate,' she says. It's March, and we're watching the final cut of the film in her flat. She got her hair dyed platinum blonde yesterday, and her scalp is still recovering. 'The anterior part of the inferior turbinate is the bit that gets erectile.'

*BLOOD* is the second work Marianna has been commissioned to make on the theme of chastity and femininity as part of the 2015 Jerwood/FVU Award for moving image *What Will They See of Me?* Her first film, *The Udder*, was about the threat of mastitis, an inflammatory disease in cows and lactating women. It's about a girl, also played by Isabel, who attempts mobility despite her mother's fears, a girl who is also an udder (the outside threatens disease). In *BLOOD* you can see Isabel edge a little closer towards teenage, and adulthood.

'*The Udder* was much easier to make even though the language was way more controversial,' says Marianna. Part way through making *BLOOD* it occurred to her that she might actually be quite a nasty person. 'There is something provocative and probing about what I'm doing,' she says, 'It's not a film about flower arranging.'

Blood is threatening and dangerous. It's too associative, too metaphorical, and its metaphors are too loaded. Blood infiltrates, seeps. Blood corrupts, and is corruptible. It flows, describes the female body as unclean, impure, and uncontrollable.

Milk connects up bodies and histories, technology and chastity. An udder is a contained unit and a microcosm; it has a specificity that blood doesn't, particularly in relation to the female body.

In *BLOOD*, a surgeon has seemingly agreed to cut out Isabel's inferior turbinate bones to cure her headaches, nosebleeds and stomach (menstrual?) cramps. The operation goes wrong; she hallucinates, and finds herself in Albania, where women live as chaste men, and the death of a girl (in a blood feud) could mean the loss of two lives for one.

We're all good to start so I'm just going to get you in the right position, okay?

In anatomy, the turbinate bones divide up the nasal cavity. The surgeon has her own script, the one she reads out to her (real) patients from

memory. The surgeon asks Isabel to jump up on the chair, which tips back to become a bed, forcing Isabel into a horizontal position.

You're going to feel yourself going flat.

The surgeon pushes a drip into Isabel's hand.

You'll just feel a little bit of pressure, nothing more, okay? Just a scratch. It's not going to hurt, all right? That's the worst bit all done, all right? You're doing really well.

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She inserts a camera into Isabel's nose – the operation is performed through the screen – and makes the cut. The incision – the scratch – causes the blood to flow out. The surgeon introduces a length of gauze in place of the bones she has removed to stop the flow.

Isabel's body is a volatile one. From Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994): Body fluids flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their control is a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed. They level differences while also specifying them.

Later, it becomes clear that the surgeon has left a length of gauze in Isabel's nasal cavity.

Isabel's operation is based on a real one performed in 1895 by Wilhelm Fleiss, an ear-nose-and-throat doctor in Berlin. Fleiss removed the turbinate bones of Emma Eckstein, a patient of his friend Sigmund Freud in Vienna.

Fleiss believed there was a direct connection between a woman's nose and her womb. According to Freud, writing in 1900, Fleiss had drawn scientific attention to 'some very remarkable connections between the turbinal bones and the female organs of sex.' In a letter to Freud dated March 1896, he wrote: 'The anxiety neurosis itself as an intoxication, for which an organic process must furnish the physiological foundation.' (Freud wrote to Fleiss of the connection between his young female patients and the possessed women in Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum*, a 15th century treatise against witches.) Fleiss and Freud were seemingly obsessed by menstruation as a psychological model. Fleiss was treating menstrual cramps with cocaine, and had started performing nasal surgery as a more permanent solution to what he termed 'nasal reflex neurosis.'

Fleiss operated on Eckstein's nose to treat her neurosis – menstruation-related depression, or Dysmenorrhea, and nosebleeds. The operation caused prolonged haemorrhaging – he had accidentally left a length of gauze in her nose, the removal of which caused permanent disfigurement.

The blood flowed out while she was horizontal, like Isabel: 'It lasted about half a minute, but this was enough to make the poor creature, whom by then we had lying flat, unrecognizable.' They nearly killed her.

There are certain physiological connections between the nose and the womb: the turbinate bones can swell and bleed during menstruation, and there is the sense of smell, of course. Freud wrote that we must have become cultured beings when we stood upright, and learnt to separate our nose from our genitals: 'as a result of adopting an erect gait, we raised our organ of smell from the ground.'

I start to think of Eckstein's nose as an opening onto desire be-

tween Freud and Fleiss, their own coked-up hysteria. As Grosz writes: In hysteria, as in hypochondria, there is a process of transference of the meaning of sexual zones and organs to other organs which are not usually associated with sexuality, or at least with genitality. **The hysteric as bent over: nose to genitals, to womb.**

It's so fucked up that she had to lose blood and tissue over it. That she had to lose face. Eckstein's experience might as well be a footnote in the footnote of the history of psychoanalysis, which reads like a history of influence between hysterical men.

There's a line in *BLOOD* that goes: A woman is a sack made to endure.

Lali discovers the gauze, and removes it. She has to. Isabel would die, or her face would rot. Lali saves Isabel, but this extraction causes the blood to flow out.

In one scene some Albanian children lift a sieve of water from the river. It doesn't flow out. A woman is a sack but she is also a sieve. She must perform a kind of impossible retention, contain an uncontainable thing: blood.

'This is the strong sex,' Eckstein said, when she woke up after her operation, still horizontal.

In the end it's about culpability. Who is responsible for this girl: the distracted surgeon who induces the blockage, or the sworn virgin who attempts to save her, and in doing so initiates the flow of blood? Is it Isabel herself?

I think about how desires can be misread, or only read one way.

In *BLOOD*, Isabel's school friends play the part of her turbinate bones. They lie in hammocks with pink sleeping bags. They sing a song. Isabel's refrain goes: I don't want my tur-bin-ate bones.

Recovering from the operation on her nose, which appears to have gone wrong, Isabel hallucinates. She is again horizontal, immobilized, like she was in the surgeon's chair. Her hallucinations take her to Albania, to Lali, to a bridge, a river, a house and a tower.

Isabel hears Lali's voice before she appears on screen. Lali's voice is deep, like a man's. She speaks in Albanian. There is glee in her voice: A girl can choose to become a man to escape marriage or simply for a better life. But (laughing) there is one condition! You must promise to remain a virgin for the rest of your life. And if you break that promise you will pay for it with your blood.

Lali becomes more insistent as she continues – less jovial. She describes how her brother died, how her family decided to raise her as a boy.

All my life I have lived as a man, and I wouldn't change it for anything.

According to the Kanun, a family that lacks a male offspring, or who has lost one to a blood feud, can nominate a girl to become the head of the family, to live as a *burrnesha* or 'sworn virgin.' It has historically been seen a way to live in a fiercely patriarchal society, a way to live freely, a way to survive not just endure.

*Burrnesha* is another untranslatable word, which derives from *Burre*, meaning, 'man.' It has nothing to do with sexual identity. It's

used to describe women who are brave, intelligent and strong, women who have promised to be chaste and never marry in order to 'lead' the family. It's about honour, about giving your *besa* and keeping it until you die.

Chastity, the repression of sexual expression, is a key concept to family honour on which blood feuds rest. Chastity is a virtue projected onto women, an ideal that is also a thinly veiled hatred. Women must enact honour through their bodies, because, as Jacqueline Rose writes in her chapter on honour killings in *Women in Dark Times* (2014), 'as a woman, you are the one who carries the seeds of its destruction.' It is the duty of a woman to make the world clean, 'As if she were already being asked to wash away, before the event, the blood of the crime of which she will one day be victim.'

'*Besa* is a word Lali worships because it's the code you can't break,' says Marianna. *Besa* is the word you can't break because it means two bloods for one. 'That's what being a *burrnesha* is: honouring *besa*.' Living as a *burrnesha* is a way to follow a code and uphold traditional values, rather than an expression of identity or a rejection of heteronormative sexuality.

In the film Lali says she's a woman and a man. She's not one or the other. 'She identifies as a woman who is a man,' explains Marianna. 'She lives as a man but enjoys saying she's a woman. She's not in drag, she's not trying to trick anyone: she's both.'

Soon after Isabel hears Lali's voice she meets her for real. Her voice summons Isabel to Albania. They talk on a bridge. Isabel asks: What shall I call you: a he or a she?

**Lali replies:** A he and a she. I am a sworn virgin. I am myself.

**Isabel asks:** Why do you have to be a virgin to be a man?

**Lali:** Because this way I am stronger and I have the right to ask for anything I want.

**Isabel:** I don't need to be a man to be free.

**Lali:** Your life is different to the one we had.

It's violent, talking about *burrnesha* as a group. It's a hard life in the mountains. Continuity is a survival mechanism, but the virgins don't swear an oath to live like a man for tradition's sake. It's a personal means of survival, specific to the individual. Marianna didn't meet a single sworn virgin who had regular contact with another one. 'There is no *We* about it,' she says. That's why she only cast one, Lali, in her film. She continues: 'I want to allow Lali's character to be the protagonist, rather than what she is.'

The Kanun was forbidden under Communism. Now there are fewer than fifty sworn virgins in Albania. Their oath will last as long as their lifetime. I ask her if she gets the feeling that they are the last generation. 'Definitely,' she says, laughing, again. 'They've committed to this way of being, but they accept that the world isn't the world they were born into.' Lali doesn't expect anyone younger than her to take the same oath.

Before Marianna went there and saw it for herself Albania was

a land of myth and fable. Stephen Bode, Director of Film and Video Umbrella, once described Albania back to her as a kind of Shangri-La, a mountainous non-place where stuff happens, a utopia. It's not such a mythical land when you're there. The notion of a sworn virgin is enchanting. It's weird: 'It's so unlike our culture that it could become exoticized,' says Marianna, once we've finished watching the film.

There is no actual blood feud in the film's narrative. Isabel's operation and recovery is the only fiction, meaning the hallucinatory scenes in Albania feel more like documentary, more 'real'. In fairytales, landscape is a backdrop against which scenarios play out. In *BLOOD*, High Albania is less a mythic place than an actual one.

'Maybe it's about integrating yourself: it stops being this fanciful thing and it becomes normal, and maybe even boring,' says Marianna. In a way, part of her first Albania trip was about teaching herself to normalize what she'd read about Albania in books, teaching herself to stop romanticizing this thing: 'As soon as I started talking to (sworn virgins) it wasn't weird. They were talking to me like: "This is my life, what do you expect?"' Lali's decision to live as a man was not transgressive. It was necessary.

Lali and Isabel play versions of themselves. Marianna speaks to me as if she is speaking to one of them: 'Stay yourselves but share your personality with me. And then collaborate on who you are in some way. Create a personality that is still you.' People don't want to play themselves when they're acting: 'It's an ambiguous zone.'

Isabel also plays a 'version' of Marianna. Isabel is a stand in for Marianna, in a way. She's an outsider, without all the language to understand this strange place and its laws. But, like Lali, Isabel has her own opinions; she says what she wants to say. Ten year olds don't think about things as 'mystical'. Marianna had to write Isabel's resistance into the script, through her questions and actions: running away, refusing to eat, or open her mouth.

In *The Udder* Isabel performed the script as if another voice was coming out of her – a kind of channelling, a flowing out that didn't feel like acting. Isabel owned the words, without being fully aware of their power. She was 'possessed' the way young girls are in horror movies, possessed by Marianna. This seemed important considering *The Udder* was, to a certain extent, about how adults project sexuality onto children.

Marianna plays me a clip of Isabel talking about Lali after we watch the final cut: 'It's quite weird that she's devoted her life, but I can see why,' says Isabel. 'Men get more advantages, and more freedom than women.'

Marianna wrote a lot of the script for *BLOOD* based on conversations like this with Isabel and Lali. She interviewed several sworn virgins during her first trip to Albania in the summer. She also taught English at the school where she shot some of the film.

'There's a line in the film that goes "A woman is a sack made to endure." A woman is a canvas bag,' says Marianna to Isabel, out of shot: 'They never break. It's quite a horrible thing to say. A woman is there to never break, just to keep on going.'

'Because man was invented first,' Isabel replies. 'They have more wisdom because they were older, and like, God made woman from them, so they probably have some more things than us, but we're still amazing.'

'What woman is not Dora?' asks Hélène Cixous in *La jeune née* (*The Newly Born Woman*, 1987).

Catherine Clement in 'The Guilty One' from the same book: 'She is innocent, mad, full of badly remembered memories, guilty of unknown wrongs; she is the seductress, the heiress of all generic Eves.' The newly born woman transcends the history of hysteria; the hysteric, 'whose body is transformed into a theatre for forgotten scenes,' and the sorceress, 'who is in the end able to dream Nature and therefore conceive it,' no longer exist, she writes. The newly born woman resides in a heaven and earth of her own making.

Towards the beginning of the film, Isabel's friends, who play her turbinate bones, suggest she's made up the whole thing. She's forced the surgeon to perform an illegal operation: Those nosebleeds aren't real either; she brings them on herself. She's a liar and a fake.

Isabel plays the devil, pretends to be ill, and it all goes wrong. 'I like her being satanic like that, to herself,' says Marianna. Isabel occupies hysteria as a form of resistance.

Isabel tells Lali she'd rather be a sack than a fake.

The last time we speak about *BLOOD*, Marianna tells me she read *Paradise Lost* in St Lucia, where her dad was moored at the time: 'That text is close to *BLOOD*,' she says. 'The way he shows the devil at the gates. The turbinate bones biting on her nose become the gateway to her hallucinations.'

Milton's themes, heaven and hell, life and death, are transposed onto particular bones and skin and blood. The line 'You are a curse, a growing burden' in Isabel's song about her turbinate bones is from Milton. Satan is in conversation with his daughter, the Portress of Hell Gate, Sin, who then became pregnant with his ghostly child, Death: 'With me in secret, that my womb conceiv'd / A growing burden.' And this: 'Thine own begotten, breaking violent way / Tore through my entrails, that with fear and pain / Distorted, all my nether shape.'

'I was thinking about blood loss, and trying to recoup a spillage or haemorrhage,' says Marianna. 'It's a loss of a bone, a loss of blood. It's not about losing paradise. It's about losing your insides.'

We say things like 'blood is thicker than water' as a universal, but there are more powerful connections to be made through the loss of the general, or indeed the loss of paradise, the loss of utopia.

For Lali, upholding *besa* is more important than anything else. 'But implicit in *besa* is the threat of loss, of two bloods for one, and the blood feud that follows – the continual debt of one for one,' I say, 'Lali believes in something that allows loss to happen.'

'That's what's so violent about it. It couldn't be what it is without the threat,' says Marianna. The threat to Isabel is at once fictional, perhaps self-imposed, but it is also real and terrifying.

Towards the end of the film there's a scene in which Isabel keeps getting out of bed. Lali picks the girl up and places her back down, horizontal, again and again. As a character Isabel is determined. 'She's passive with intent,' says Marianna. 'That's how I see her. She's in an in-between, caught in a constant state of erecting herself, like the bones cut out of her nose.'

Isabel is pushed down by Lali and by the surgeon, by her own conflicted desires. She resists.

The credits roll over a number of photographs of Lali from different

times in her life, shown in reverse. As Isabel gets older Lali gets younger. In the last photograph Lali is a young woman, a teenager, a little older than Isabel. A black and white portrait tinted yellow and blue, with touches of pink.

Isabel undergoes a pre-pubescent becoming that is more about disintegration than forming. With retention (chastity, nasal blockages) comes the threat of loss – the loss of life and bone and blood, the loss of insides.

Dear child of sorrow – son  
of misery!  
Naomi Pearce

Wrote Keats of Chatterton, that boy poet with curls of red hair who drank arsenic as a way to stop living. In the painting of his death by Henry Wallis, which I always loved, he wears bright blue breeches – short trousers that stop just below the knee, binding tightly to the joint. Details I obsessed over: the way his small hips curved up towards the open window, the oppressive feeling of aloneness against the crowdedness of a smog-filled city skyline, how desirable his grey white recently dead skin was.

'The whole trouble with Western Society today is the lack of anything worth concealing,' said Joe Orton in his diaries. Now

his body, reduced to particles of grey ash, mingles in soil with those of the lover who caved his head in. What bonds are shared still between secrecy, sex and death?

Mark gives us male bodies that are wasted and white. Landscapes of bone, sometimes limp, occasionally overcome. His work edits out noise, stuck in a more general malaise of things not said.

When I see the sculptures in the studio I think of them as queer sentries, flowers held ecstatically upwards in the place where flags at half-mast should be. They come as a pair like candlesticks or columns. An awkward double act that flirts with function but fails to commit. Coupled or twinned in this way their sameness points to shared conversation and the intimacy of recognition. In his book *White Girls*, Hilton Als writes