



CONTEMPORARY FICTION

TITLE: Buckle Up, Love (novel)

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Buckle Up, Love by Katja Grcić speaks in a contemporary female voice through various perspectives and fragments that move between the lyrical, the essayistic, and the factual. Each piece traces the psyche's yearning for its own wholeness.

Unafraid of intimacy and pain, whether in family, romantic, or social life, the narrator also ventures into dreams, symbols, and archetypes.

Her descent into darkness and emptiness is an uncertain, risky, and startling passage into the inner wound, a nightmare in which she encounters figures such as Psyche, Persephone, and Echo, along with others from her personal and collective history. This rhythmic polyphony of voices gradually shapes the text until, on the very verge of symphony, it poses an important question: Are we truly ready to accept ourselves as we are?

Reviews:

“This modern Bildungsroman features a cast of several main characters and more than a few supporting ones. We get to know them well while patiently gathering information as the story unfolds. Each of their traits becomes an event both linguistically and on the page.”

“... this collection of finely crafted, stylistically varied vignettes — ranging from a product label to free verse — is held together by the epic self we recognize from our daily lives in a novelistic way. It's the same solipsism we know intimately from social media posts, yet here it's bound with a far greater dramatic and narrative tightness, as a novel demands.”

– Anda Bukvić, *Moderna vremena*

Katja Grcić is a poet, playwright, novelist and essayist currently based in Zagreb, Croatia. She holds an MA degree in English and German Studies (University of Zadar) and an MA degree in Theatre Dramaturgy (Academy of Dramatic Arts, Zagreb). Additionally, she attended the Centre for Translation Studies in Vienna and the University of Graz. As an independent researcher Grcić has published two scientific papers: *Politics of Fear and Solidarity Mechanisms in Documentary Theatre: Staging Asylum in '6' by Žiga Divjak* and *Encounters in Other Places: Performative Heterotopia in 'The Labour of Panic' by BADco*. She translates from and to German and English and has medium proficiency in French and basic proficiency in Italian and Slovenian.

Her debut poetry collection *Nosive konstrukcije (Load-Bearing Walls)* was published by MeandarMedia in 2015 and was later followed by the bilingual collection *Ljeto/Summer* in 2017 and poetic prose *Pisma Ziti (Letters to Zita)* in 2020. That same year her monodrama *Proljeće naše zlovolje (The Spring of Our Discontent)* was published in the magazine *Kazalište* (Vol. XXIII No.81/82/83) and staged as part of the Monovid-19 project at the ZKM Theatre in Zagreb. Her first novel *Ljubavi, pripremi se (Buckle up, Love)* was published in 2025 by OceanMore.

She has received various artistic grants, most notably from the Croatian Ministry of Culture and Media. She has also won several awards for drama, including the prestigious Marin Držić Prize for her works *Strah tijela od poda (How Bodies Fear the Ground, 2019)* and *Prema podacima: DRUGA (According to the Data: The Second, 2021)*. The audio drama *How Bodies Fear Ground* won the Croatian Theatre Award in 2025 for the best Croatian audio drama. Her most recent poetry collection, *ISTINA nedjeljom i drugim danima (Truth on Sunday and Other Days, 2023)* was shortlisted for the Drago Gervais and Ivan Goran Kovačić Prizes. Grcić is the director of the arts organization KADAR, where she works as a producer and theatre maker.

Works:

Buckle Up, Love (Ljubavi, pripremi se, Oceanmore, 2025), prose

TRUTH on Sundays and Other Days (ISTINA nedjeljom i drugim danima, Pismo & glava, 2023), poetry

According to the Data (Prema podacima; In: Marin Držić Award - Croatian Drama 2022., Disput, 2023), drama

How Bodies Fear the Ground (Strah tijela od poda; In: Marin Držić Award - Croatian Drama 2019, Disput, 2020), drama

Letters to Zita (Pisma Ziti, MeandarMedia, 2020), poetic prose

Summer (Ljeto / Summer, MeandarMedia, 2017), poetic prose

Load-Bearing Structures (Nosive konstrukcije, MeandarMedia, 2015), poetry

Katja Grcić

Buckle Up, Love

translated by Andrea Jurjević

POTENTIAL

In the dead of night, I found myself suddenly compelled to write to a man I've never really liked,
at 3:53 a.m. to be exact

dear K,

I never liked you, but F says you're waiting for some marker results

I once waited for lab results too

I didn't tell anyone

no one sent me a worried email in the middle of the night

asking

if I got them

how I'm doing

That's how the story should've started. Perhaps all stories start on the night when you have to leave your cell phone for repairs. What terrible emptiness. Or is this what freedom looks like?

Z

I'm reading a story about a man who came in like a Z, awfully basic and exhausting, and a woman who stood upright like a T and didn't budge an inch while he wastefully waved the blade. He nicked her in several places, even though his goal was something else entirely – to cut off a piece of her for himself, to lie that it was an accident. He failed.

War is sometimes prevented by staying still, letting the other person tire themselves out, wearing them down with your immobility, not letting them see your weakness – a cell phone thrown against the wall and tears, whose average pH is seven.

LOVE STORY

All love stories begin with my father and end with my mother. They begin with his charm, humor, intellect, care for others – his many fights for justice and rights – one cause or another, and end with her despair, deep sense of worthlessness, defiance, the unbearable compromises that push toward the collapse of all limits.

In the Roman Empire, the limes was a fortified border against barbarian peoples. The most exciting one, between the rivers Tyne and Solway in northern England, remained distant and imaginary to me, a gentle reminder of Hadrian from the pen of Marguerite Yourcenar, guardian of the world's beauty, mortally ill but composed, ready to withdraw his army before suffering unnecessary losses. He was an emperor, traveler, poet, humanist, architect. He touched both women and men under his fingers, he knew how to extend the climax of peace; he was the one who ended conquests, established borders, and granted equality to provinces. A *homo universalis*, a non-binary mind, free spirit, he thought and felt in Greek, and governed the empire in Latin. Centripetal toward Athens and centrifugal toward Rome, he loved in more than one way, which is the only life skill that a ruler of their own life needs to master. With his memoirs, Yourcenar wanted to reconstruct from the inside what nineteenth century archaeologists and restorers had been restoring on the outside.

For the love story to continue, my father would turn into a depressed, unhappy man, someone useful to others but never to himself. Those closest to him became mere tasks to do within his noble service, a skilled game he played in which something was always given and ensured, but was often not what the other truly needed, and the exchange that took place remained painfully unspoken. My mother's fortifying walls rose and fell frequently. Dirt embankments, ditches, wooden palisades, ramparts, towers, watchtowers, governing bodies, castles, and camps would seem clearly defined and well-placed one day, only to be scattered the very next, making movement through her territory an endless impossible mission, a foreign and dangerous terrain that couldn't be conquered and eventually wore every traveler down until they finally collapsed and gave up on moving any further.

RESTORATION

As a child of parents who never divorced, my life became an ongoing restoration – every decision, move, and relationship served it, and when the balance of friction and destruction canceled out the efforts of my domestic restoration, I would retreat, wounded, from my mother's battlefield into my father's distance and waited for time to circle around again before anyone noticed I was gone.

I couldn't be made into a copy; the price was always too high, and besides, that method seemed unimaginative and boring. I set out, at least in intention and limited by my own (lack of) knowledge, to conserve, present and illuminate my archaeological remains, and to build upon the rest, preferably with something solid – steel, concrete or marble, ready to shamelessly haggle over whether it would be Carrara, Pentelic or Proconnesian, even when I couldn't afford any of them. In the case of concrete, it was important not to pour on the bedrock, but to place geotextile between the layers, preventing contact between the substrate and the poured section so that in some future collapse, the concrete part could be easily (which was never actually easy) removed, leaving the lower part intact. In the case of marble, it was crucial to choose the right technique and method of treatment, and handle the adhesive carefully so that the new material fuses with the old as seamlessly as possible, matching both dimensions and emotion. If such a new piece threatened to detach, the stone was anchored using a combination of stainless steel and epoxy resin. Before anything, though, the most important thing was to get the diagnosis.

ECHO

My whole life I've been repeating the same lesson, I dream about school countless times – I'm frazzled, late, unprepared, trying to copy the test, there's no time, someone's laughing, mocking my efforts. The foundations are most important. Everything else is permanently unprotected – bombs on Kyiv, bombs on Beit Lahiya, bombs on our city – you grab the bag of Cheetos, a Barbie doll and the *Mickey Mouse Almanac* and run alone toward the shelter that's twenty-five house numbers too far, you're a child, they've explained to you that this is a game, not a war, and that the place where you live is a home, not a transformer station.

For the acoustics in my head they made computer calculations and structural assessments, but the restorers couldn't outsmart the echo, prevent the sound from bouncing back, or avoid the screws and nuts vibrating at certain frequencies. The one who could weld the joints has not yet appeared.

IMPLANTS

Some things must be replaced, I knew that much.

company name: Straumann / headquarters: Basel, Switzerland / employees: 12,000 / CEO: Guillaume Deniellot / founded: 1954 / revenue in 2024: \$2.5 billion / number of enhanced smiles: 6.5 million / pace: every seven seconds

- Close.
- Open.
- Close.
- Open and hold... hold... don't close...
- It might be a little uncomfortable now, as I'm going to have to tighten it... but if it hurts, just let me know, and I'll give you some anesthesia.

I nodded, thinking how wonderful it would be if life were like my dentist, if it would warn you what to expect, so you'd be prepared for even the wildest situations. Something like:

- It might get a little uncomfortable now. Someone with whom after a year of friendship you entered an intense sexual relationship is going to email you to inform you they're no longer interested in you. He'll just disappear from your life, offer some platitude about friendship, and if it hurts, just tell me right away, I can give you an anesthetic.

Before the screwing, of course, came the drilling. I was terrified, and there's no anesthesia for that. Fear can only be eased by pushing through it; there's no better formula, no innovative method that relieves it.

The dentist who was doing my crown had curly hair, a playful gaze, and was light on his feet. In a tone that I both liked and found deeply repulsive, he remarked to the nurse who was suctioning the blood from my mouth with a tube:

–“My, what a beautiful bone!”

At the word *bone*, I felt sick to my stomach.

To simultaneously inflict pain and heal it, to cut and drill, yet at the same time sew and screw, the man was surely aware of the tension he embodied, and it only added to his appeal. When he completed the job, he lowered the chair's backrest to a horizontal position, checked my pulse, asked if I had low blood pressure, and told me to stay lying down for a while longer. He was humming. With an enviable expertise at multitasking, which I'd come to appreciate less over the years, he moved into the next exam room, where a new patient was already waiting on another chair.

His father, who was hovering around (the dental office was in the family home) like a supervisor, peeked in and, seeing me, called out:

–“Oh! Looks like we're offering a full-board service from now on!”

SANCTUARY

Lat. Pantheon ← Gr. Pántheion

An introverted temple, simple and unassuming from the outside, conceived as interior space, in its lower part a combination of brick and stone, in its upper part tuff and volcanic rock, heavy below, light above, *equal manifestations of the same power*, ring-like coffered hours, slow below, fast above, thicker below, thinner above, but everywhere evenly lit, articulated by rectangular and semicircular niches with columns, a self-aware space that unites contradictions, open just enough for the most sacred to enter, and the most painful to exit. Nine meters.

I've been searching for it within myself for years.

DISCUSSION

The darkest place, says a Chinese proverb, is always under the lamp.

ROMANCE

When Katharine Hepburn met Spencer Tracy, she's said to have told him:

–“I'm afraid, Mr. Tracy, that I might be a little too tall for you.”

He replied:

–“Don't worry, darling, I'll bring you down to my level.”

Judging by their long-term affair, he did just that.

It would've been more noble for him to rise to her level, but ego today, just like then, remains childishly dependent on units of measurement.

TWO DEATHS

There were two deaths. The first was brought by a woman who cut the body open, swallowed pills, wanted to become someone else. I said: Okay. Hugged. Knocked on the glass. Tried to break through. With my tongue. With my head. With my chest. Impenetrable.

The death of a mother. Mine and hers. Two different deaths. Hundreds of miles apart and by separate killers. I thought it'd be easier if we cried together. I was wrong. There are people who don't know how to cry. But they do know how to – control, humiliate, withdraw, attack, manipulate, snort, avoid, swallow, gulp, stuff, pull, cut, lie, masturbate... They had to learn so much to compensate for their lack of tears. They don't know about zero; they set off into negative or positive endlessly – they're either the greatest victims around who everyone always pities, or they're the greatest abusers, but only behind tightly closed walls. Usually both. All the control is in their hands. My mother's minefield.

The other was brought by a man who struggled with pronouncing the letter R. He shrank like a cheap cotton T-shirt. He said: I have no height, I have no voice. He quickly realized – I have a mind. I said: That's all right. That's enough. Knocked on armor. Tried reaching him. With words. With the strategy of the Russian tundra. With my bare thigh. My gaze. Impenetrable.

The death of a father. Mine and his. Two different deaths. Hundreds of miles apart and by separate killers. I thought it'd be easier if we cried together. I was wrong. There are people who don't know how to cry. But they know – how to glue, to join, to build, to restore, to assemble, to fix, to charmingly lie, push a little further, and then some, then to measure, to calculate, to observe, but they don't know how to leap into fear. They know about zero; they know it well. They're enclosed by it. They're neither the victim nor the abuser, but they don't know who they are. When I realized I was losing, I decided to surrender. I thought: this will reduce the tension, end the daydreaming, castrate the excess desire. I was right. It dissolved.

– “You should've withdrawn your army. The army of the heart. But why did you organize a tribunal for him? He didn't do anything to you,” says La Maga.

I can't explain to her that there are people who wound others by mere inaction. Sometimes fatally. They just stand there and do nothing. They watch someone else's heart on the floor like a fish out of water. When it stops flopping around, they shrug. They say something half-funny, maybe: She did it to herself, she killed herself. They wink. With my father's nonchalance.

MAGA

After leaving Cortázar's novel and the article "la," Maga moves to Vienna. She earns a PhD studying interpretation in psychotherapy for asylum seekers. She gets a job at the university, forgets about South America, eats *döner* kebab, and rides a green bicycle.

If you ask her about her father, she says, throat cancer.

If you ask her about her sisters, she says, don't ask.

If you ask her about her mother, she says nothing, only puts her head between her palms.

ILLNESS

I said, Dad, they discovered _____

I said, Dad, the diagnosis reads _____

He sipped on coffee and turned to a new page of the daily newspaper. I'll never forget that scene. It was the real cause of my illness. That lasting, silent, and insidious one, which kills just like he does: by inaction. On the surface, you're fine. Everything is as before. You take some tiny, utterly tiny pills. You're totally fine. Except: you're tired, tearful, irritable, itchy, hungry, cold, filled with fog, you don't know what to do, you don't know what you're allowed, you slow down, you speed up, you rub your eyes, you scratch your scalp, you gather water and soft tissue where you're slimmest, where you need to fool the enemy, your hair's falling out, your voice is hoarse, you're sleepy at noon, then at three, then again at five. You're obsessed with finding a solution. You want to control the consequences of inaction. You get even more tired.

One day, a glass falls on your foot, blood splatters across the white tiles, three stitches, the day after tomorrow you quit smoking. You call your mother, a voice says – you've reached a number that's no longer in service. In a month, you move out. Things aren't particularly good, but that's how they're supposed to be. At first you're timid, over time louder, your breath deeper, you sing, you stretch, you want to learn a martial art, but a pandemic breaks out. You survive a loneliness that would've crushed many. You learn to fight like a woman, think like a man, cry like a child. You cut the pills in half, sometimes into quarters, reduce your dose, you know you're better.

There isn't a more important question for a woman than

THE QUESTIONS OF SAFETY

Our territory is Russian tundra; everything seems clearly visible, but: our light is dispersed, distant objects sometimes seem very close while blades of grass or mounds appear large and far away. It's an optical illusion. Magnetic storms sometimes make it difficult to use modern devices, even old magnetic compasses. And when the polar nights and days begin, the stars and the sun become useless. You find your way by feel. You orient yourself by smell. You feel your way along uneven tracks. Those whose zero is integrated progress slowly, but steadily. Those enclosed by it get lost. They end up in the taiga. They lie. They lie. They lie. They tire themselves out from lying. They confess. They get eaten. Lies eat people. They're always hungry. Insatiable. They don't know about the Zen of zero – the emptiness of a full circle in the gentle resistance of pressure from both sides. They betray their wives, leave them. Afterward, they mourn for years. They dream of the tundra, an infinite emptiness of beauty. They haven't crossed even a third of it. And even the little they have, they've mostly just scurried across it. Now they cry in their sleep, like my mother.

A year after her death she tells me: Forgive me, I couldn't give you what you needed, I know. I'm sorry.

He writes: I can't give you what you want. I throw my phone against the wall. With all my strength. It doesn't crack. It just darkens.

I'm forty years old, and suddenly everything becomes fascinating. I see a man on the levee walking backward, and I know: this is the moment when I can do things all over again, only now completely differently. I can live my whole life backward. I can walk like him, feel all that space behind my back, know exactly where every tree, puddle, rock is. The tundra is mine and I am hers.

Come in. Enter. Suppose you're welcome.

WOMAN WOMAN

– You don't think the two are related?

– Hm.

– I mean, I've never felt attracted to a woman before. And now, suddenly, after everything with my mother.

– Hm.

– The third time, it was unavoidable.

– Hm.

She hmm-ed rhythmically while I dug and sorted through the findings. The first was that woman on the island. That was, let's say, a mild attraction. Then there was the woman on the peninsula; that was already a violent attraction, full of fear, anything could've happened if I hadn't locked the bedroom door. And then, the third time, on the mainland, it could no longer be avoided, nothing could be locked, there was nowhere left to run, her hand stopped on my thigh.

CUT!

I remember everything: how I calmly took that hand and lifted it off, then stood up, calm as someone giving a well-rehearsed lecture, walked to the bathroom, half-peed, washed my hands, closed the door after me, passed by her, then, him, said see you later, grabbed the doorknob, wrong door, got lost, then found my way, all in a few seconds, stepped outside, the cold winter air that I adore, then walked, briskly, as though I knew precisely where I was going, with that little white cloud over my head, like in the comics, it said: What the fuck?

Everything unavoidable is dangerous and should be avoided, but at the same time, it simply can't be. Maybe you can adapt, but poorly, like an amateur, you can say: Whatever. Wave it off. But the body is a traitor – it gets you wet while you're talking in your serious voice about pH levels, the crisis of values, nonsense.

I message her, type: About yesterday, when you put your hand on my thigh...
After that message, of course, everything went
up in motherfucking
flames

WOMAN MAN

– And you really think this has nothing to do with my mother?

– Hm.

– I think it does: I think that when the subconscious allows consciousness a glimpse of the deep cut, through the tissue to the bone, that a mother inflicts on her own child, a girl-woman: she goes mad. And then that mad part becomes completely lost, looks for anything resembling a mother to cling to, so it doesn't completely lose its mind. It frantically searches for breasts, a soft, wet pussy, collarbones, wrists, it searches for hips, wide, the widest, to hide between them from the world, to push the tongue where it can no longer speak, only search, search for the irretrievable, what would never, never, never take up a knife and cut, for no reason, into its own flesh, into its own child. As she comes, I'm somewhere in between. This body is the same as my body, this is a dramatic scene in which I'm trying to put the knife back in its sheath, claim someone's vulnerability like a lottery prize, correct the rhythm in the wrong place, I'm overjoyed watching her in pleasure, what is this, all these concentric circles, it's okay, calm down, this is a safe place.

Two days later she pulls out a knife and stabs me right where the blood had just scabbed over. After being stabbed again and again, I learned: sex doesn't heal anything, only love does. But so many masks passed themselves off as love that I started to lose faith that there was anything but the mask. That lasted until I took off my own.

She hmm-ed again and added:

– That behavior of hers, it reads as vulnerable narcissism to me.

I've read all the books on all types of narcissism. I started seeing through walls. I knew in every square meter of my tundra who had been here and when, whose trail was fresh and whose was ancient, which animal had fed off me, who had wanted to tie me to a table leg, just as my grandmother had tied down my mother when she was a child. Who's going to tell me he was joking, that it was all just a game, that he didn't mean it? Who meant it? He? She? Does it matter which pronoun took the knife and pierced my neck? When the inevitable finally happened, one thing became clear and cruel: I had loved him her more than I loved myself.

It sounds romantic, but it isn't.

It doesn't matter if he wanted to stab me or if she did it by accident.

If he did it. It doesn't matter.

THE CRUSHING OF COTTON

- This can't be fixed anymore.
- What do you mean?
- Well, it's simple, this is crushed cotton, you've crushed the cotton, and that's it.
 - What do you mean, I crushed the cotton?
 - Look, if you already bought a nice piece of fabric, excuse me, but I notice this is a nice brand, you should've looked at what's written on the label... right here, look...
 - Huh?
 - See this symbol?
 - The circle?
 - Yes, the crossed-out circle. You must've put this in the spin cycle... If you'd just looked at the label...
 - I don't think I've ever looked at a label in my life.
 - Look, with the junk from H&M, fine, whatever, but for nice pieces like this... you can't do that... the cotton is crushed... we can take it back, but there's nothing we can do, it can't be ironed out anymore.
 - Dear God.
 - Next time, check the label.

TRUE LOVE

He watched me like an artifact behind museum glass as we lay on the dock in the September sun.

– Do you believe true love is possible?” he asked me.

The tone of his question made it clear: he didn’t believe.

QUESTIONNAIRE

I said I wanted Jelinek, that she was the only one who really interested me.

– Ms. Grgić took Jelinek for her thesis topic, I'm sorry. You'll have to choose something else.

And that's how it went my whole life. Whenever I thought I knew exactly what I wanted, someone would say:

– I'm sorry. You'll have to choose something else.

What I wanted would go to someone a lot like me. Someone whose last name differed by a single letter, someone like that.

So I chose Frisch. He was smart, no doubt about it, but I always had a vague and insidious feeling that his ghost had started the fire in Ingeborg Bachmann's Rome apartment, that he, from a distance, made sure her cigarette fell from her mouth, that the ember would first catch her robe, then the sheets, and then everything would go

up in motherfucking

flames

TO PISS

I had a couple beers, spoke like when I'm sober, just faster and more boldly. I draped myself around his neck like a dress desperate for a window display.

He was repeating my father's lines:

Imagine what he said to me...

She betrayed me...

She's to blame...

I bought...

I work all day long...

It was bearable until he said: He pissed on us. He used that as a metaphor, but it stung like a papercut across a fingertip. I remembered a dream where my brother and I stood in a field, Father in front of us, peeing into the wind, his back to us. The wind did its thing – all the urine ended up on us.

He says that, and I want to run.

And I do.

He follows me. But a woman near him yells his name accusingly, then asks a question she's already answered: Are you going with her or me?!

I'm already gone. I'm not looking back. I know full well that a wounded man always chooses whoever is closer and easier.

I recognize the men who come my way: the stingy ones, the ones who don't want to give, or those who buy your affection with fake generosity until the moment they've registered themselves as owners (of you? of your affection?), and then they become just like the stingy ones.

And what about me? What kind of woman am I to welcome them?

The kind who seeks love but doesn't get it. So she stops seeking. She gets tired. She throws her phone against the wall. She destroys. She builds walls. From helplessness and rage. She becomes a woman who doesn't know how to receive. She seeks a man who doesn't know how to give.

WAITING

That night I went out looking for the moon – it was nowhere to be found. So I told myself, this means you have to wait better, wait more gently, with more patience, with more love.

Nothing truly valuable have I earned, only received.

All I had to do was wait: for the water to clear the silt, for the fire to burn itself out, for the wind to carry a voice, for the earth to bear fruit.

LOVE

here we go, love

buckle up: eight women live within me
a warrior, a farmer, a girl, a mother, a weaver, a witch, a dancer, and a black panther.

The first one knows what a battlefield is. She's died on it countless times. She knows she must do what she can, and more, to prevent a fight. But if it comes to that, and it will – she must be sharp, swift, and decisive. Inflict only the pain that's necessary. Show no one more compassion than you show yourself. Kiss both eyes of those who leave, but only if the blessing of truce descends silently on branches. Reject all cruelty – it is the plaything of the weak.

The second is wounded. She dreams of dipping her hands into the wet earth. She dreams the same dream every night. In her dream, she calculates: the angle of the light, the length of the shadow, the slope of the land. She measures: the fertility of the soil, the proximity to water, the strength of the wind. She cries every time she wakes up and sees: nothing is there. Give her whatever land you have. Ask for nothing in return – only then will you get the richest harvest.

The third is scared. She is a triangle forced into a theorem and told: stay here, we'll be back. But they won't be. She's an eternal little girl whose hair was cut off, whose dolls were broken, whose bicycle was smashed. A protector-abuser settled inside her and took over everything. He has ruled for years; he cannot be overthrown. Over time, the warrior woman became better at protecting the girl woman from everything external, but internally, he goes on attacking.

The fourth loves unconditionally. She knows how to defeat a tyrant. She lays her hand on the warrior's hand. She tells her: Don't draw the knife from its sheath. If you kill him, you will also kill the child he has inhabited. Let me. She sits beside the worst – hugs him, tells him, you're loved. I know where your hatred comes from. Let me nurture it and transform it. He pushes her away. He resists the water that dissolves him. But she penetrates anyway. She melts slowly, like a glacier, for thousands of years. Her endless tenderness will defeat what armies of warriors cannot.

The fifth is a worker. She rises at dawn: serious work awaits her. To hem the world, to sew up all that has torn, to knit blankets. She is the happiest of all, her mind is clear, her hand steady. Between the hand and mind beats the tireless heart of the world, underpaid and disenfranchised, it works anyway. If it stops, the world will unravel again, tremor will seize the hand, the mind will become obsessed. It must go on.

The sixth senses. She sees what you cannot see, hears what you cannot hear – you can banish her, burn her, call her mad. You'd be better off if you don't: she'll return enraged and vengeful in a form you won't recognize. She can heal your wounds, sharpen your vision, and make every storm announce itself weeks before it arrives. Trust in her magic and it will work.

The seventh is the most flexible of all. She coils like a snake – and you know it, and she knows it; you want her and you fear her. She looks you straight in the eye, calls you into the wet earth, sheds her skin. Admit her power, and she will admit yours. Let her wrap herself around your neck, slide down your chest, lead you into the heart of darkness – you didn't really believe what those who tried to stone her said about her, did you? They won't recover from the poison with which she responded. Hands on their groin and Medusa before their eyes, fear will keep them away from pleasure every night.

The eighth is a moonless night. She conquers and possesses, plays and attacks, is affectionate and dangerous. You can't stop looking at her, even though you can barely make out her silhouette. She needs vast space, tall trees, challenges. Much about her will forever remain unknown to you, a wilderness where you'll build nothing, a place you won't cultivate, a sanctuary without ceremony. The only right you have over her is to be happy she exists.