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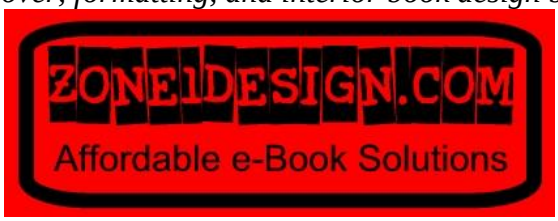

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The Defiling

Bridget McKenna

The Defiling

WE CAME DOWN from the plateau, past the places of occasional rain, and the desert was upon us without warning, red as blood.

There were three of us that year, poets and pilgrims crossing the empty places to the city under the stone, and we were nearer our journey's end than its beginning when we rode down a lip of ruby sand and paused a the bottom to consider the prospect that stretched before us. We would cut across this southeastern corner, skirting most of the great central desert that each year devours a larger portion of the fertile land around it like some greedy beast. When we rested at last, it would be under the great weight of the sky-stone that shelters our spirits and hears our vows.

I represented the Western Poethouse as I have done every seventh year of my matriarchy, to oversee the giving and taking of sacred vows and the assigning of poets to the patrons for whom they had been chosen. In front of me rode Dionaïs, who would be leaving us when we reached Novarabi to become a poet in a great house, and behind me rode Amalthea.

What can I say of Amalthea? Her very existence was a poem. Her inner beauty so matched her outer perfection that every action embodied the perfect balance of form and meaning for which the true poet must strive all her days. Her mother, realizing what a treasure she had created all unknowing, brought her to our door when she was barely old enough to walk, that she might not be tainted by the world outside our walls. I was not young when she came, and less so when I rode before her on that journey thirteen years later, but her presence was all the youth I required. Faithful Dionaïs was my right hand, but Amalthea was my heart.

We could have traveled in luxury, using the vast resources of our Poethouse, but there was a purpose to this journey taken so austerely. A woman who has seen the beauty of green growing things, of blue waters as far as she can see, might perceive only ugliness everywhere she looked in this place, might see harshness in the colors, hear emptiness in the long silences; but if she will stay a while she will discover beauty where she never thought to find it. She will learn to listen as the desert gives her its poems of scorpions and razorgrass. So it had been for me since my first crossing, and there were deserts in my poems now, and hot winds that never blew through the sheltered walls of the Poethouse or the marble porticoes of patrons' villas.

There was no speaking or making of poems as we rode through the day, our hoods pulled up to ward off the sun as it climbed higher in the sky. The shifting sun altered the color of the sky, the sand, and the twisted rocks by degrees as it fell toward the west, and as we watched, its shadows brought different planes and faces into relief,

changing the shape and meaning of everything. A constant teasing wind sucked at the moisture in our mouths and noses, as if to make us as dry as it. The dunes shifted under pressure like slow red waves. The heat became a part of us.

At length we stopped to take some water. Dionaïs dismounted and took a waterskin from the packhorse. “Will we be long in this place, Mother Belàn?” she asked as she held up the skin for me.

“This day and another before we see a tree, my child, and at that it won’t be very green.”

Behind us, Amalthea sighed.

I spoke without turning. “Are you troubled?”

“Yes. This place troubles me.”

“One place must be like any other to a poet,” Dionaïs said. “Someday you’ll be sent to live for seven years in a place you’ve never seen. And after that another strange place, and another.” Her voice attempted the confidence of womanhood, but I could hear the uncertainty in is as surely as I heard the skittering of a tiny lizard down a sand dune as it ran for the shade of a spiny bush.

“It is a hard place, Daughter, and if we were here longer, it would test us. We’ll have but a taste of it this journey.”

“There is death here, Mother Belan,” Amalthea persisted, and there was no fear in her voice, only the kind of calm knowing that marked most of her utterances.

But Dionaïs had not my sense of things. “Perhaps you had better think again, Sister, before the taking of vows. The spirit of Esta would not look kindly on a poet who runs in fright from each new experience.”

“Death is not a stranger in any place,” I interrupted. “We’ll move on now.”

It was another hour before we heard the sound. It might have been the cry of a small animal, but we knew at once that it was not. “It’s over there!” Amalthea cried, and urged her horse ahead of us over the next ridge. When we crested the ridge, she had dismounted and was running toward a shape on the sand.

“Amalthea!” I cried. She continued to run, sliding down the incline with each step. Her hood had fallen back, revealing coppery poet-locks in the sun. I raised up in my stirrups and brought my voice to full power. “Stop!”

She halted, quivering. I eased my mount down until I was beside her. “Daughter, what is the matter?”

“Mother, there is a child over there.” She pointed at the small form a few lengths away.

“So it would appear. And yet much must be considered, even of so obvious a thing.”

“A poet’s objectivity is her most precious possession, after her voice,” Dionaïs observed, handing Amalthea the reins of her forgotten mount. She rode closer and stopped beside the dark figure on the sand, which rolled slowly from side to side, making high-pitched, breathless sounds.

Amalthea walked toward them, the hem of her white robe stained with the red of the desert, and I followed.

"It's a boy-child, about two years old," Dionaïs reported.

"He's dying," said Amalthea, looking away from Dionaïs to me.

I could see the truth in this. The sun and heat had dealt harshly with him. His tongue had swollen to fill his mouth, and red sand clung to the shriveled blisters that covered him everywhere his rags did not. His weeping was long done, I supposed, with no-one to hear, and he was too weakened to crawl from this spot. He would die soon, and as I glanced at Amalthea's face, I hoped we would be far away when it happened.

"Perhaps the son of a laborer, abandoned because he was too weak to survive the crossing," Dionaïs continued. "If food and water were scarce, his family may have decided to conserve by leaving him here."

"Perhaps we could save him," Amalthea proposed, moving closer and looking down at the child, who had stopped moving and was looking up at her, its eyes beginning to dull from the unrelenting wind.

Dionaïs turned in her saddle and regarded Amalthea. "Why?" She looked at me, then at her sister-poet. "'The world flows through me, yet I am not a part. I am a maker of poems. I will take from the world only that with which I make my poems, and I will leave no mark on the world but the mark of my poems.'"

"Accurately quoted, Daughter."

"It's right there in the tenets of Esta. A poet is an observer of things—not a shaper of fate. Here is a thing we may observe, and poems may come of it." Dionaïs dismounted and approached the child, careful not to touch. It followed her movement with its eyes.

Amalthea looked up at me. "Is a poet not human, Mother? And this child. What is he?"

"A man-child, and the child of laborers. His people are born like beasts, and are as plentiful. You have seen little of life, and it is not good that you saw this, but to interfere in it would bring great tragedy."

"Greater than this?"

Behind us, Dionaïs gathered her breath, preparing her voice for a poem. I took a crystal from my sleeve and broke the seal. The poet's mind forgets little, but the crystal forgets nothing.

Dionaïs began:

"What vast, empty place
brings these four souls together—
actors, playing parts?"

And Amalthea replied:

"What empty heart conceives us
as puppets, knowing us not?"

Dionaïs had used the form Gathering In. Had Amalthea linked another verse of the same form, it could have begun a long, twisting, branching poem like a vast passageway with myriad rooms, a twist that would become a braid as I added my verses into theirs.

But Amalthea's response was in the form Barring the Door, and not only opposed Dionaïs's theme, as was proper, but actually turned it back on itself, changing her intended meaning to its opposite. It was a challenge—an attack.

But Dionaïs could not reply. The next verse must be Amalthea's:

"Look! Are these three doves,
granting blessings, or only
ravens dressed in white?
at Novarabi the sky is stone,
and there are no stars."

By using the form Turning a Corner, Amalthea had taken the portion for Dionaïs's response, had she chosen that strategy. Now Dionaïs must begin anew, though she had the choice of linking to either part of Amalthea's verse; the more subtle the link, the more pleasing and powerful the poem. The child had grown quiet—listening, or perhaps only closer to death. I was relieved not to hear it.

The sun had begun to set rapidly, and I knew we would have to make camp here rather than move on in the dark. We would do without a fire this night—there was precious little to burn.

Dionaïs began:

"See now the sun retreats
behind a twisted hill, turning,
gathering her hood.
Alone, serene, ascendant—
the white-hot moon contemplates

the beauty of death."

She was taking back the offensive, but her use of the form Walking Through betrayed her lack of confidence. Using more words to say more does not require a poet. Amalthea dropped to her knees beside the child. My heart froze. She spoke low into the deepening light, but her voice was the only sound in that vast redness:

"Garnet sands—
blood of sacrifice.
Heart's jewels."

The form, Cutting. It implied an end to this making if Dionaïs could not turn it to advantage with a better verse. I spoke into the silence, lest it grow too long. "We will stay here the night. Amalthea, help me dismount."

Dionaïs was too distracted to notice that I had not asked her, and my heart would not beat properly until I had removed Amalthea from the danger of touching the boy. "Let me lean on you child," I said, "while I walk the stiffness from these old legs."

"You are not old, Mother." She helped support me as I walked, her touch a gentler warmth against the day's heat. "You could never be old to me."

"I was old before you were young," I chided. "And even I am not as old as the tenets of Esta. Every woman in every poethouse has sworn to live by those tenets, as will you when we reach Novarabi. They are more than words. They are the reason for our existence."

"I can't remember when I didn't know the tenets," Amalthea said, "though I supposed they were about the preserving of life, and not the wasting. Perhaps I mistook the words for the meaning."

"There is history as well as meaning in them. Now I will tell you something you would not hear until we attended the giving and taking of vows: once there were no poets, only tellers. There are tellers still, but they bring no beauty to the world. To us belongs the making of beauty from words, but in all the ages of the poets, there have been times when we were hated, feared by those in power. In Esta's time we were nearly cleansed from the Earth."

"Why?"

"Need I tell *you* the strength of words or the power of the voice? Even now your sister Dionaïs wavers in her previous conviction, and you, however talented, are but a novice. Imagine a master poet swaying thousands with only her voice and her verses—sowing unrest, toppling states."

"No poet would do such a thing. It's unthinkable."

“Unthinkable because of the tenets. Our adherence to them, as others cling to gods or treasures, is the reason we’re allowed to live.” I heard her breathing change as she comprehended my words. “If you were to defy these laws of our being, even now before you were sworn, you would be turned away from the order, stripped of everything you possess, driven out into the world. There can be no other way. Did you think the stories of outcast poets you tell one another late at night in the sleeping halls are made up to frighten fainthearted children?”

I drew her into my arms and held her close to soften the harshness of my words. “You are a good daughter, and someday you will be a great poet. You will bring us honor and become matriarch when your time in the world is done. Novices for a hundred generations will imitate your style until they find their own. A voice such as yours comes to a Poethouse once in ten lifetimes, if that. I thank Esta you came during mine.”

We turned and walked back toward Dionaïs, who was busying herself with bedrolls and waterskins some distance from the child, from whom came only the small sighing of its breath.

The sky had gone gold-green at the horizon, and an ice-blue evening star grew brighter in the west. The wind had died. Dionaïs handed me a waterskin. I drank and held it out for Amalthea, who turned away.

“Drink, Daughter. You’ll become ill.”

“Mother, I cannot.” She sat looking toward the small form on the sand, which had grown very still.

Dionaïs laid a comforting hand on Amalthea’s arm. “You are very young, Sister, for the taking of vows. When you are older, perhaps you will understand.”

“I understand now,” she replied softly, and sat there long after the sky went black and full of stars. Even asleep, I heard her rise.

Her feet whispered on the sand as she crossed the distance between us and the boy, and the heaviness of every other step was the weight of a waterskin in the crook of her arm. I prayed not to hear, not to know, but the spirit of Esta was deaf to me. I heard the cool, flat sound of splashing water, the settling of a cloak, the fall of tears and the sand drinking them. A sorrow came to visit me then—a sorrow that has never left me, never fails to wake me in the night, greet me in the morning, sit by me like some dark companion through the day.

“I hear you listening, Mother,” Amalthea whispered. “Do what you must do.”

We rose before the sun, while the night chill was still on the air. Amalthea sat as before and might never have moved, save that her cloak covered the small form in the distance.

Dionaïs’s eyes went wide at the sight, and I gestured to her to saddle my horse. She pulled her hood forward to cover her confusion and hurried away.

I went to stand behind my dearest daughter.

“The child is dead,” she told me, and her voice was almost perfect in its control. “I stayed with him, but I couldn’t save him.”

“I know.” It was all I could say and hope to keep my own voice.

“‘There can be no other way.’” She spoke my words back to me, and though I might rip my throat out from remorse, I could not take them back.

“Not for us.”

“I know.”

In two days we reached the edge of the great desert, and though no-one spoke of it, the image never left my mind of Amalthea stripped of her robes, shorn of her locks, the fresh red scar where they would take her voice away forever.

At the easternmost edge of the basin she reined in and looked back the way we had come. I knew she would speak, but I did not break a crystal. These words would be for my heart alone.

“How little stirs within
the arid emptiness of
this desert of the heart.”

She threw back her hood, met my eyes, and spoke the last of her poem:

“The road around this wilderness
is shorter than the way through.”

Far ahead, Dionaïs rose in her stirrups and pointed out the black stones of Novarabi.

Dear Reader

I hope you enjoyed *The Defiling*. If you’d like to tell others what you thought of it, please go to the page where you bought it and leave a review. Reviews and ratings help me reach more readers, and all my readers are important to me.

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—*Bridget McKenna*

Poets in the Wasteland

How I wrote "The Defiling"

Late in 1985, I received a phone call at work, telling me I'd won first place in the fourth quarter of the second annual Writers of the Future contest for my short story "The Old Organ Trail." I'm pretty sure I was in shock for a few days. A few months later I received another very welcome phone call, this one from the late Algis Budrys, who was editing the anthology of contest winners and finalists. WotF was putting together an experimental workshop. Would I like to attend? Was the Pope Polish? At the time he was indeed, and within a few weeks I was in Taos, New Mexico with eleven of my newest friends—prizewinners and runners up hand-selected by Algis from the first two years of the contest.

Our instructors were a who's who of the golden age of science fiction: Fredrik Pohl, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe, and Algis himself. For eight hours a day, for six days, we soaked up as much as we could hold of their amazing wealth of knowledge about how to tell a story. Then we went back to our rooms at the El Pueblo Lodge Motel and read stories, critiqued stories, outlined stories, and did exercises that taught us more about telling stories. On the seventh day we threw a massive party. Roger Zelazny attended, as did Walter Jon Williams and George R.R. Martin. It was epic.

One of our last exercises was to go to the Taos public library and pick a book about something we were interested in, but didn't know much about, then sit down and read. From this book we were to get an idea about a story, outline it that night, and bring the outline to the workshop in the morning.

I picked a book about Japanese poetry. In it I read about a game of sorts among Asian poets of long ago, wherein they would add to and play with one another's verses extemporaneously and competitively. I also read an account of a traveling poet who encountered an abandoned child by the roadside, and what happened between them. I had found my story.

Next morning each of the instructors took a small group of us aside and we discussed our outlines. Gene Wolfe liked mine, which thrilled the heck out of me. He

told me “Don’t change a thing. Write it very short and very cold, and title it something about defilement.”

I returned home to California at the end of the week and wrote the story. In those days I wrote first drafts longhand, and I wrote quite a bit of the first draft to this story in a booth at Denny’s in Redding, California while a waitress kept my coffee cup full. I can remember vividly the moment that Mother Belan revealed Amalthea’s fate to me. She had known it all along, of course, but I had no conscious knowledge of what was going to happen until I wrote the words. Then I stared at them in shock for several minutes—coffee and coffee shop alike forgotten—wondering where the hell *that* had come from. At the time I was still new to the unconscious mind writing miracles that happen when the story’s readiness meets the writer’s in that perfect place, which may or not be the Denny’s at the Cypress Avenue exit on northbound 1-5 in Redding.

That was 1986. I swear I sent that story to every editor who was buying short science fiction and fantasy, and got it back with a “Thanks, but no thanks” from each of them in turn. One night at a convention in 1990 while exchanging rejection stories, I mentioned to my dinner companions how this particular story—even though it was the recipient of my best-ever rejection letter (from Ellen Datlow when she edited *Omni*)—had been turned down by everyone I’d sent it to. Kris Rusch, who was then editing *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* said that I must not have sent it to her. “I did,” I told her, “and you rejected it.” Patrick Price, then editor of *Amazing Stories*, said “Well, you never sent it to *me*.” “Ah, but I did,” I said (*thoroughly* enjoying myself now), “and *you*rejected it too.”

Soon after, I sent it to Pat again, and this time he bought it. It appeared in Amazing Stories Volume 65, #5—the last digest-sized issue of that magazine, and the last issue edited by Patrick Price.

About Bridget McKenna

Bridget McKenna was born in Las Vegas, Nevada, before it was either large or glittering. She spent most of her formative years in a desert, which informed the setting for this story.

Bridget now lives in Seattle—the categorical opposite of any desert anywhere—where she reads, writes, edits, and enjoys a nice curry, though seldom all at the same time.

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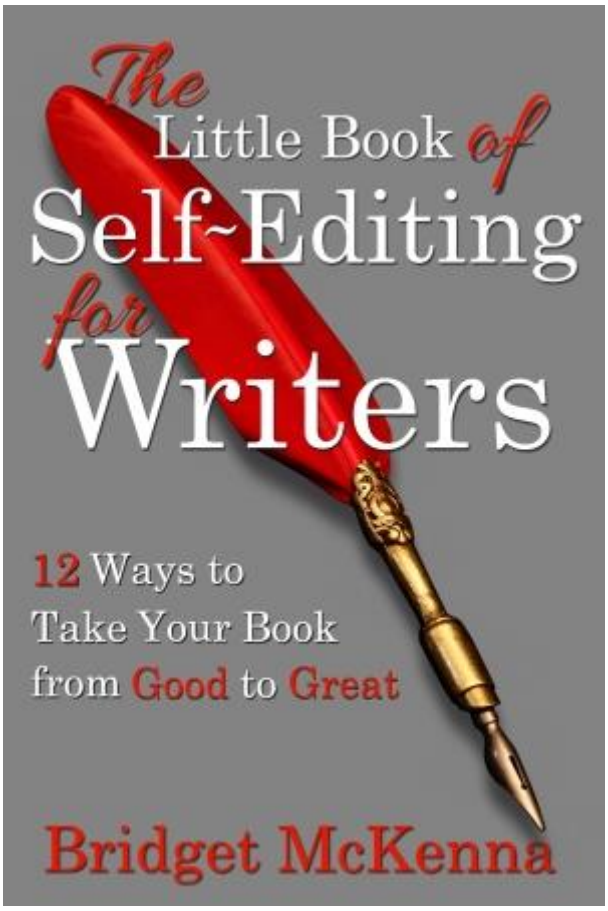
Also by Bridget McKenna



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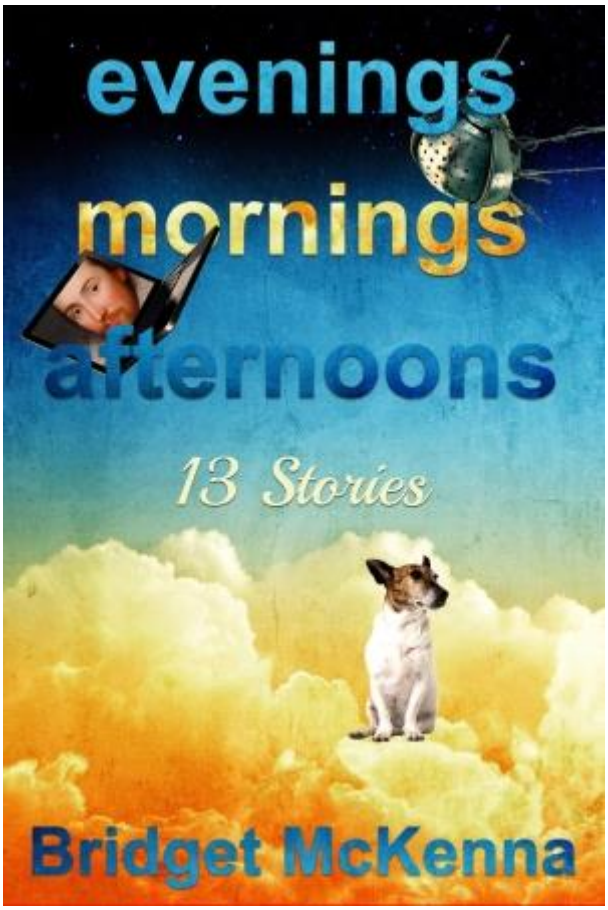

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