PRAISE FOR HER DARK WINGS

‘Salisbury’s voice sings at the crossroads of classical and urgently modern. She perfectly captures the violence of teenage friendship between girls and the holy terror and hunger of seventeen. Her storytelling is tight and focused and moves at a breathless pace: as all good myth-making should. This story is strange, elegant and chilling: I devoured it’
Sarah Maria Griffin

‘Melinda Salisbury is a lush, magical writer – who isn’t afraid of the dark. Her Dark Wings captures the glory of having a real best friend, and the mythic pain of being betrayed by one’
Rainbow Rowell

‘Infused with myth, Her Dark Wings is darkly enchanting, bold and unexpected. I loved experiencing this richly imagined world through the eyes of such a well-drawn, nuanced heroine’
Mary Watson

‘A skilled contemporary reimagining full of friendship and fury’
Deirdre Sullivan

‘All the hallmarks of Salisbury at her best: raw emotion; searing prose and a darkly imagined world’
Non Pratt
HER DARK WINGS
Also by Melinda Salisbury

*The Sin Eater’s Daughter*
          *The Sleeping Prince*
          *The Scarecrow Queen*
*The Heart Collector and other Stories*

          *State of Sorrow*
          *Song of Sorrow*

*Hold Back the Tide*

Non-Fiction

For Franzi, Katja and Antje, my Furies, my sisters
Tell me, of a world where the gods still rule in Olympus, where they spread across the world as sure as rosy-fingered Dawn and held their own these many years; Sing Muse, of the Titan spawn; Zeus, Poseidon, Demeter. Sing of Hades; the Receiver of Many, alone in his unchanging, unyielding realm.

Sing of the Boatman, of the Furies, of the rivers that flow in and around the land of the dead. Tell me where the triple-goddess, Hecate, now dwells. Tell me of silver-tongued Hermes, who moves between the land of the living and the world of the dead, foot in either, belonging neither.

Then tell me of the flower-touched girl hidden at the ends of the earth; of betrayal and vengeance, of blossoming and blame. Tell me of heartbreak and healing, tell me what it means to forgive, to plant a seed, to watch it grow.

Tell me what happens next, Muse. Sing.
The morning after the festival, Mr McKinnon—who wrote and edited the Island Argus when he wasn’t teaching us—published an emergency edition of the paper. He must have started working on it the second he got home, then cycled around the Island in the dark to make sure everyone had a copy before breakfast. He went to so much effort.

The headline he used was ‘Daly’s Hero’.

I knew he meant Hero from Hero and Leander, because we’d just finished the Double Heroides in his class. It must have been the first thing he thought of: how fucked up to teach a poem that ends in a double drowning to someone who’d actually drown before he handed our essays back. But everyone else read ‘Hero’ and thought about film characters or stupid warrior men from epic poems. People who lived and died starting wars or fighting wars or ending wars; there was always a war
involved somewhere. They’d forgotten about the actual Hero, who was just a girl.

So the headline did not go down well.

Cally Martin, who runs the Spar in Daly, went door to door with a wheelbarrow collecting every copy she could get her hands on; I didn't let her have ours. She dumped them on Mr McKinnon’s front step, where, allegedly, Thom Crofter pissed on them, but only on the back page, out of respect. He was careful to avoid the photo of the girl found dead in the lake at the Thesmophoria Festival.

Daly’s Hero.

I’ll tell you something about Bree Dovemuir—she was no Hero.

Bree Dovemuir was my best friend for almost my whole life, until she became the person I hated most in the world. Sometimes second most, depending on the day.

Three months ago, it was still Bree-and-Corey, Corey-and-Bree, said as one word, treated as a single, doubled-headed entity; a mini-Hydra. The photo Mr McKinnon used in the paper was actually of the two of us, taken from the school website, except he'd cut me out so it was just her. The irony was not lost on me.

Despite his best cropping efforts, you could still see the seashell curl of my ear pressed against hers, the matching double-helix piercings that got us both grounded two summers ago; me for a week and Bree for the whole holiday. We’d held each other’s hands as the
needle went in once, then again, pulses syncing with the beat of the song the piercer tapped her foot to.

I hadn’t wanted my ears pierced, but Bree begged me not to make her do it on her own. And when mine got infected—of course—it was Bree who insisted I keep them in, making me swear I wouldn’t take them out. And the sad thing is that when we walked into school the first day of autumn term, the rings hidden under our hair, it felt like it was worth it.

I should have known she was a snake then; she’d changed her hoops from the steel ones they were pierced with to tiny silver ones, so we didn’t quite match.

As if the headline wasn’t bad enough, Mr McKinnon had changed the dimensions of the photo and he’d messed it up, stretching her jaw wide, making her forehead huge. If it hadn’t been her obituary, I would have been thrilled by her mutant Wanted-Poster face. If it hadn’t been her obituary, I would have graffitied it—blacked out her teeth, added a monobrow, some hairy warts. Stabbed out her eyes with the compass from my maths set. Glued it to a doll made from grass and hair, spit and blood, and asked the Furies to curse her for her crimes. But it was her obituary, so there was no point; the worst had already happened.

The photo had been taken at the end of term, just before the summer that was supposed to be the best summer of our lives, because we were seventeen and Bree swore the summer you were seventeen was the best summer you’d ever have. And it wasn’t quite the truth to
say it was of the two of us, because Alistair Murray was in the original photo too.

I was in the middle, the bridge between them; Bree’s best friend and Ali’s girlfriend. Until Bree and Ali decided they didn’t need a bridge, after all. They’d cut me out of the picture too.

When someone dies, there are certain things you have to do. The body has to be cleansed and oiled, a coin left on the lips for the Boatman so he’ll carry the soul away to the Underworld. There is the prothesis the night before the funeral, where the body lies in state and women sing the dirges over it. The next day is the ekphora procession to the graveside, where milk and honey and wine and water are poured into the grave as an offering to Hades. The chief mourners sometimes offer a lock of their hair too. Finally, the perideipnon feast to celebrate the dead.

Without the proper rituals the dead are left behind on the shores of Styx, unable to move on. It’s kind of the same when someone breaks up with you. There are rituals you have to do then too—not official ones, they don’t appear in any sacred text. But everyone knows them; the tried and tested ways to get over heartbreak. And you have to do them, or you won’t move on either.

First, you call all your friends and they come for a sleepover—they come to you so you don’t have to get dressed, or risk bumping into your ex on the street. This is the relationship’s prothesis, but instead of singing
dirges you sing your favourite songs, starting with the sad ones and then getting to the real angry shit, the fuck-you-forever songs. Once your blood is up, you delete your ex’s number, all the messages they ever sent and block them online. You do it to them before they do it to you—this is especially important if you’re the dumped, not the dumper.

Then, everyone lies and says actually they hated your ex, that they were never good enough for you. They promise better, brighter things, offer up rumours of who’s newly single, who always had a thing for you. These words and deeds become your bread. They feed and nourish you. They are your perideipnon. Really good friends will bring ice cream, too.

Slowly, you start to come back to life.

A week later, you ceremonially remove a lock, or several, of your own hair and get some new style, or you dye it rainbow colours, and a week after that you kiss someone’s brother or sister or cousin behind the old abbey ruins in Fraser’s Field. After a month, when it’s obvious it’s really, truly over, you take everything they ever gave you and set it all alight in your back garden; an offering to Aphrodite to send you a better lover next time. The fire makes your neighbours worry about sparks and wooden fences, and mutter darkly about the noise as you and your friends dance around a metal bin full of burning memories, but it has to be done.

These are the rites of the break-up, and if you do them properly, they fix you.
But when Ali and Bree left me for each other there was no ritual, because Bree wasn’t there to be the chief mourner. I was left marooned, somewhere in-between.

Now Bree is actually dead. And if you're wondering if I'm sad about it, because it means we'll never get to mend our broken friendship: No. I'm not.

I'd wished for it.