

Goddess Only Knows

Nikita Gill is a viral force for her Instagram poetry. But her verse takes readers way back beyond the modern age – giving a voice to ancient, silenced characters.

by **Scarlet Lili Thomas**

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What does it mean to grow up inside a story that was never written for you? For poet Nikita Gill, this question lingers beneath everything: myth, girlhood, the act of writing itself. She returns time and again to the idea that stories are not fixed – they shift depending on who is allowed to speak.

Her latest book, *Hekate*, begins with rupture – a cosmic war, a world already fractured. It is an opening that situates us immediately inside violence, inside instability, and inside a girlhood shaped by forces far beyond her control. “I’m interested in the most dismissed character in the room,” the Irish Indian author tells me. “And, often, that’s a woman.”

That interest becomes the emotional and political centre of her work. In Gill’s most recent retelling in verse, the titular Greek goddess is not untouchable. She is reimagined as a child, displaced and shaped by war. The myth expands outward, becoming less about divine power and more about what it means to endure.

Long before *Hekate* – before her seven bestselling poetry collections, two verse novels and international recognition – Gill was publishing her writing online. “I always thought writing was what I was meant to do,” she says. “It’s as good as breathing for me.”

Like many creatives, Gill was encouraged towards stability rather than writing. For years, she sent her work out into the world, only to have it sent back. “I learned to see it not as rejection but as return,” she reflects. “It changes how you think about it. It makes you keep going.”

During this time, Gill was working as a carer for children with physical and learning disabilities, sometimes reading her work to the young people in her care. It was these young people who encouraged her to keep going, to share her poetry publicly, to attach her name to it and to take up space. What followed feels almost mythic in itself: a piece going viral overnight, then another, then another – a slow and then sudden reshaping of what a poetry career could look like. Today, she has more than 845,000 Instagram followers. Yet with visibility came categorisation. The term “InstaPoet” quickly became attached to Gill’s work, used to describe (and sometimes look down upon) writers who have built their audience online.

Gill believes the term “was created to make us smaller”. She points to how many of the writers grouped under the label are women (often women of colour, and often queer) writing about trauma, displacement and survival – work that was emotionally direct, politically engaged and widely read. And yet its accessibility became the very thing used against it. “There’s this idea that, if a lot of people understand your work, it somehow isn’t worthy,” she says.

What sits beneath that critique could be something older and more structural – a literary canon historically shaped by a narrow demographic, where legitimacy has long been tied to exclusivity. “Poetry has often belonged to a very specific class of people,” Gill suggests, “and then suddenly you have young women reaching huge audiences, and that disrupts things.” Her response to the “InstaPoet” label has evolved. Where there was once frustration, there is now an awareness of its place within a broader cultural shift – a “turning point” that “opened the door”, she says.

That opening echoes through *Hekate*. The book is a reimagining of myth that allows for rupture and the possibility that the story itself might change. In classical mythology, Hekate is a liminal figure: goddess of crossroads and thresholds, as well as magic and the moon. But much of her story remains fragmented, underdeveloped or filtered through male-authored texts. Gill is drawn to those gaps: “Whenever there’s a powerful woman in myth, there are silences. And those silences are interesting.”

She approaches them with questions. What happens to women on the losing side of war, to daughters when mothers are erased, displaced or taken? What kind of power emerges not from dominance but from survival?

In one of the book’s most striking lines, Gill writes: “Children born in wars are made of a different kind of clay.” When I ask her about this, her response shifts, becoming more personal. Her grandfather, a Kashmiri man displaced during the 1974 Partition of India, was a formative influence. His experiences of loss and migration shaped not only his life but also the way he taught her to see. “He became a better man because of what he went through. He had a softness, a compassion, that came from understanding what it means to lose everything.”

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Gill herself was born in Northern Ireland during the Troubles – a context where the language of conflict was everywhere. “You know what bombs are, what curfews are, from a very young age,” she recalls. “That does something to you.” In *Hekate*, this understanding is translated into myth. The goddess becomes a child (or “Godling”) whose normality is defined by instability; where the absence of war feels more unsettling than its presence. “When the noise stops, that’s when she feels afraid,” Gill explains of her protagonist, “because that’s when the aftermath begins”. It is a reframing that feels both poetic and deeply political. War is not only an event but also a condition that lingers, shaping psyches and generations.

Gill repeatedly returns to women who have been demonised or misunderstood within traditional narratives: figures like Hekate, the Biblical figure Lilith or the Hindu goddess of destruction, Kali, whose powers have often been recast as danger. For Gill, writing is a way of shifting that lens to open space for new ways of seeing. “The writer’s job isn’t to tell you what to think,” she says. “It’s to hold up a mirror.” And not the distorted mirror we are often given — shaped by bias,

power and repetition – but something clearer, which allows us to sit with discomfort, with contradiction, with complexity. It’s a philosophy that extends beyond myth into the act of writing itself.

When I ask what she would say to young writers, especially those still searching for their voice, Gill’s answer returns to a single idea: “Don’t abandon yourself.” It’s all there in her fictionalised account of Hekate’s journey, defined by persistence. “She doesn’t give up on herself,” Gill says, “and that’s where her power comes from”. Power, in this sense, is endurance. It is the ability to remain soft in a world that demands hardness. It is the refusal to disappear.

This also means rejecting the idea of art as competition – a notion the writer sees as shaped by broader capitalist structures. Instead, she encourages writers to listen inwards: “The loudest story inside you, the one that keeps asking to be written – that’s the one that matters,” she says.

As she prepares to arrive in Australia, Gill hopes to take in the textures and atmosphere of a place she has never before visited. She says walking is where she does most of her thinking, which makes sense: for Gill, stories are never static. They change. They are rewritten, again and again, depending on who is brave enough to tell them.

And, sometimes, the most radical act is simply to take the story you were given and refuse to let it be the only one you write. ■

HEKATE IS OUT NOW. NIKITA GILL WILL APPEAR AT MELBOURNE WRITERS FESTIVAL (7–10 MAY) AND SYDNEY WRITERS’ FESTIVAL (17–24 MAY).