And the shepherd said: “Why are you crying little flower?”

And she replied: “Because your llamas will come and eat me and there’ll be none of me left to look at the sky.”

‘But if they don’t feed on you, they’ll waste away, little flower, and I’ll have nothing left.’

And the flower said, “So I know, shepherd, but a flower has a heart of cloud. It drips of rain when it is trampled. Won’t you sit down to hear my tale?”

And the shepherd listened to the breeze in her throat and to her tiny heartbeat, the heart no larger than a grain of sand. The Andes were behind her and so his eyes were filled with mist from the distant volcanic peaks.

“Come winter, my mother dies, and all my family. Our seeds fall to replenish the earth, but for all those long wintry months, everything feels brittle and bare, and only red dust nudges me awake. If it snows, I freeze in my cusp of earth, shivering in my unformed body.

Then spring comes, and the snow melts away. The salt surfaces in the Cordillera, leaving luminous trails, and my soul too whitens with hope. My rootlets quiver in the newly-washed soil. I hold on fast, struggling to stand when warm desert winds threaten to blow me out. And when I am strong and straight and delirious with sky, I become every colour I see. Every day I grow invisibly, nibbling the air, breathing the yellow off an open petal, blinking onto a blue dawn. Until I am tall and beautiful and complete.

And that’s when you come, shepherd. Your llamas hungry and wanting, snuffing my colours and wrenching my stalk. And I give myself over and over, like my mother and father and my sisters and brothers. We all go until there’s none of us left but a memory of sky.”

And the shepherd asked in a voice made of leaf: “But what can I do little flower?”

And the flower said: ‘I won’t be sad to die if you borrow my eyes to look at the sky. Come winter, when the earth is starved and there are no flowers to gaze at the clouds, remember my dizzying yellow and my soul of volcanic ash.

And the shepherd smiled: ‘I’ll tell you what, little flower. From now onwards, I’ll cut ribbons of colourful fabric and fasten them to my llamas’ ears: blues, pinks and all shades of orange and red. That way, in the cold season, when your seeds lie in wait and the land is buried in seven shades of brown, when even the yareta pales against an angry horizon, the memory of you will hum through the air, and my llamas will long for you like they long for a cloud, remembering, always, that they live because you die. And every year it will be like this, little flower, until you’re born, over and over, to drink off the sky.”