

QUESTIONING THE DEAD

Go to the mouth of a cave,
dig a trench, slit the throat
of an animal, pour out the blood.

Or sit in a chair
with others, at a round table
in a darkened room.
Close your eyes, hold hands.

These techniques might be called
the heroic and the mezzotint.
We aren't sure we believe in either,

or in the dead, when they do appear,
smelling like damp hair,
flickering like faulty toasters,
rustling their tissue paper
faces, their sibilants, their fissures,
trailing their fraudulent gauze.

Their voices are dry as lentils
falling into a glass jar.
Why can't they speak up clearly
instead of mumbling about keys and numbers,
and stairs, they mention stairs ...

Why do we keep pestering them?
Why do we insist they love us?
What did we want to ask them
anyway? Nothing they wish to tell.

Or stand by a well or pool
and drop in a pebble.
The sound you hear is the question
you should have asked.

Also the answer.

THE NATURE OF GOTHIC

I show you a girl running at night
among trees that do not love her
and the shadows of many fathers

without paths, without even
torn bread or white stones
under a moon that says nothing to her.
I mean it says: *Nothing*.

There is a man nearby
who claims he is a lover
but smells of plunder.
How many times will he have to tell her
to kill herself before she does?

It's no use to say
to this girl: You are well cared for.
Here are some flowers, here
is food and everything you need.

She cannot see what you see.
The darkness washes towards her
like an avalanche. Like falling.
She would like to step forward into it
as if it were not a vacancy
but a destination,
leaving her body pulled off
and crumpled behind her like a sleeve.

I am the old woman
found always in stories like this one,
who says, *Go back, my dear*.
Back is into the cellar
where the worst is,
where the others are,

where you can see
what you would look like dead
and who wants it.

Then you will be free
to choose. To make your way.

SOR JUANA WORKS IN THE GARDEN

Time for gardening again; for poetry; for arms
up to the elbows in leftover
deluge, hands in the dirt, groping around
among the rootlets, bulbs, lost marbles, blind
snouts of worms, cat droppings, your own future
bones, whatever's down there
supercharged, a dim neon in the darkness.
When you stand on bare earth in your bare feet
and the lightning whips through you, two ways
at once, they say you are grounded,
and that's what poetry is: a hot wire.
You might as well stick a fork
in a wall socket. So don't think it's just about flowers.
Though it is, in a way.
You spent this morning among the bloodsucking
perennials, the billowing peonies,
the lilies building to outburst,
the leaves of the foxgloves gleaming like hammered
copper, the static crackling among the spiny columbines.
Scissors, portentous trowel, the wheelbarrow
yellow and inert, the grassblades
whispering like ions. You think it wasn't all working
up to something? You ought to have worn rubber
gloves. Thunder budding in the spires of lupins,
their clumps and updrafts, pollen and resurrection
unfolding from each restless nest
of petals. Your arms hum, the hair
stands up on them: just one touch and you're struck.
It's too late now, the earth splits open,
the dead rise, purblind and stumbling
in the clashing of last-day daily
sunlight, furred angels crawl
all over you like swarming bees, the maple
trees above you shed their deafening keys
to heaven, your exploding
syllables litter the lawn.

QUESTIONS THAT EXPECT THE ANSWER YES

Are you a morning person
or a night person?
Do you take milk and sugar?
What is the nature of your trip?
Do you have luggage in excess
of the allowable weight?
Do you like your body?
May I offer you a quick peek
under this bandage?
Who do you hate?

Do you believe in the Afterlife?
Have you seen my red shoes?
Do you love me?
Do you really love me?
Will you love me forever?
Did you remember to pick up the laundry?

Where is the Ladies' Room?
Sorry - where is the Womens'?
Where is the door marked with a little stick figure
dressed in a triangle?

Is he a good man?
Is he a good dancer?
Are you listening to me?
Who was your servant last year?
Honey, what went wrong?

Do you endorse the death penalty
in extreme cases? Do you endorse death?
Have you engaged in ethical business practices?
Am I my brother's keeper?
Shall we increase the voltage
or are you ready to talk?
Can you touch your toes without bending your knees?

Would you participate in a gang rape
if nobody was watching?
How much did you pay?
What should we name the baby?
Why have you put me in this chair?

DO YOU BELIEVE IN GENOCIDAL MASSACRES

Do you believe in genocidal massacres
between consenting adults?
Should history be taught in schools,
or does it corrupt minors?
Are those who have learned nothing from sex
doomed to repeat it?
What are the five secrets of a successful marriage?
Doctor, is it serious?
Can anything be done for him?
Who deserves it more than you?
Has gangrene set in?

If Mary has three apples and John has seven,
and Susan requires ten oranges right away
or she will shoot to kill,
is this a nightmare?
Why are you pointing that thing at me?
Where are we going?
Can I bring the family photos?
Can I take my bear?

Can matter be created from nothing?
If a tree falls in the forest and no one
is there to hear it, is there a sound?
Why doesn't God answer?
When you cough, does it hurt?
Where did you lose the keys?

Have you ever been happy?
Are you happy now?
When can we go home?
How long have we got?

HEART

Some people sell their blood. You sell your heart.
It was either that or the soul.
The hard part is getting the darn thing out.
A kind of twisting motion, like shucking an oyster,
your whole spine a wrist,
and then, hup! It's in your mouth.
You turn yourself partially inside out
like a sea anemone coughing a pebble;
There's a broken plop, the racket
of fish guts into a pail,
and there it is, a huge glistening deep-red clot
of the still-alive past, whole on the plate.

It gets passed around. It's slippery. It gets dropped
but also tasted. Too salty, says one. Too sweet.
Too sour, says another, making a face.
Each one is an instant gourmet,
and you stand listening to all this
in the corner, like a newly-hired waiter,
your diffident, skillful hand on the wound hidden
deep in your shirt and chest,
shyly, heartless.

Of souls as birds

When she was little Frieda had loved the goblins, the princesses, the old men of the sea, the water maidens, the raven brothers, the haunted woods. Yet the stories were often absurd, often inconsequential. Frieda's literal, logical battleaxe of a mind had been bemused and entangled by these tales. She had tried to chop her way through the briars. She did not like nonsense. There was a mystery there, forever beyond her grasp.

Margaret Drabble, *The Witch of Exmoor*, p. 113.

The French writer Colette believed that you should have either too many truffles, or none at all. Just one would not suffice; and so it is with fairy tales. One or two won't do it. But what is "it"? Think of a Bible that contained only the story of Cain and Abel, or an Odyssey that began and ended with the Cyclop's cave. The body of folktale is indeed a body, an organic structure made of its many component parts. One story alone is only a finger or a toe.

Once upon a time, long, long ago - to be precise, in the 1950s - the body of European folktale as it was known in North America was severely constricted; most of it was kept veiled from view, and only a few tales were popularly circulated. These were pinkly illustrated versions of "Cinderella" or "The Sleeping Beauty", stories whose plots were dependent on female servility, immobility or even stupor, and on princely rescue; and it's entirely understandable that women for whom "fairy tale" meant this sort of thing would have objected to it as encouraging girlie inertia. Even these few stories had been censored - all vengefulness, all pecked-out eyes and nail-studded barrels removed: the wicked sisters danced at the wedding, but not in red-hot shoes. It was thought

wrong at that time to encourage or even to acknowledge the darker emotions. For well-brought-up little girls of the fifties, the main point of these stories was the outfits. Ruffles were all.

I was not a well-brought-up little girl of the fifties. I had been born in 1939, just after the outbreak of the Second World War, and there was no hope then of sweeping the darker emotions under the rug. There they were on the world stage, displayed for all to see: fear, hatred, cruelty, blood and slaughter. A few fairy-tale hanged corpses and chopped-off heads were, by comparison, nothing to get squeamish about.

Also, I was exposed to a large chunk of these tales at an early age, before the manicured versions had hit the stands. When I was five or six, my parents sent away by mail-order for the complete *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. This was the 1944 Pantheon edition, with an excellent translation by Padraic Colum and a commentary by Joseph Campbell, and it was flagrantly unexpurgated. The illustrations were by Josef Scharl, and they were not at all pretty, not even in the Arthur Rackham gnarly-goblin way; but they were very forceful, emerging as they did straight from the same traditions of peasant folk art that had shaped the tales themselves.

This was a tradition that called a spade a spade, a wart a wart, and an ugly sister an ugly sister, and most likely a witch into the bargain. Your starving parents might leave you in the woods, to save the last bit of food for themselves. Your stepmother might plot to get rid of you so her own kid would inherit the loot. For the most part, life was hard, and lived close to the rock, and driven by the *sauve-qui-peut* variety of common sense; temptations to evil abounded, and were frequently heeded. There was many a skeleton in a dress, many a heart on a plate, many a hairy pot-bellied devil; blood gushed from loaves of bread, coal-eyed cats breathed fire. It was a long way from outfits: there was not a ruffle to be seen.

This wasn't a book designed to please every small child. To some it would have given screaming nightmares. Possibly it had in mind a more adult audience. My parents were taken aback when the book arrived, and contemplated withholding it, at least until my brother and I were older; but it was no use. We could both read by

that time, and we ate this book up. Not one truffle at a time: the whole basketful.

What was the appeal? It's hard to be definite about that. The stories didn't have any direct application to our real lives. They weren't much good from a practical point of view. At this time we were living for half the year in the Canadian north woods, and we knew that if we went for a walk there we were unlikely to come upon any castles, if we met any bears or wolves they wouldn't be the talking kind, if we kissed a frog it would most likely pee on us, and if we got lost, we wouldn't find any shortsighted, evil old women with patisserie cottages and child-sized ovens. Rescue, if any, would not be supplied by princes.

So it wasn't our outer lives that the Grimms' tales addressed: it was our inner ones. These stories have survived as stories, over so many centuries and in so many variations, because they do make such an appeal to the inner life - you could say "the dreaming self" and not be too far wrong, because they are the stuff both of nightmare and of magical thinking. As Margaret Drabble says, there's a mystery in such stories which is beyond the grasp of the rational mind. There's also a large element of the haphazard. The rules - about elderly people in forest settings, about speaking to shabby-looking although prestidigitous strangers, about animals gifted with large vocabularies - are arbitrary, and they vary from tale to tale. In one story, a talking wolf is your friend; in another, he's out to eat your granny. In one, old folks in the shrubbery must be given your lunchtime sandwich or bad luck will befall you; in another, they're just waiting to turn you into stone, or into dinner. Things happen in fairy tales because they happen, as in dreams; and as in dreams, there are large anxieties, and sudden victories, and serendipitous gifts; and as in dreams, there are recurring patterns.

Fairy-tales were a taste that stayed with me; but although I went on to read all of the Andrew Lang Blue, Green, Red and Yellow Fairy Books that I could get my hands on, as well as the Arabian Nights and Lamb's *Tales of the Gods and Heroes*, and Dickens' *Christmas Carol* and Ruskin's *King of the Golden River*, and the complete tales of Edgar Allan Poe, and *The Wizard of Oz*,

and anything else of that kind I might stumble across, I kept returning to the Grimms' stories. By the age of nine or ten I'd memorized a good many of them.

Asking which story was my favourite might seem like asking Colette which was her favourite truffle; yet I did have favourites. Thinking back some fifty years later, trying to pinpoint which these were, I'd have to say they were the ones with birds in them.

Now, in real life birds were birds. They cawed, hooted, quacked and chirped, and, if they were loons, made eerie sounds at night that caused the hair to stand up on your arms. But in fairy tales, birds were either messengers that led you deeper into the forest on some quest, or brought you news or help, or warned you, like the bird at the robbers' house in "The Robber Bridegroom", or meted out vengeance, like the eye-pecking doves at the end of "Cinderella"; or else they were something you could be transformed into. These last were my kind of birds.

For instance? There are a lot of for instances. In "The Singing, Soaring Lark", the bridegroom is a Cupid figure who is transformed into a white dove because his bride has disobeyed his orders to let no ray of light fall on him; she must follow his trail of blood and feathers until she can change him back through her devotion. In "Jorinda and Joringel", the beloved is transformed into a caged nightingale by a malicious witch, and can only be freed if her lover can recognize her in her bird form. In "The Six Swans", "The Seven Ravens", and "The Twelve Brothers", various assortments of brothers are changed into swans or ravens - usually through some indiscretion or ill-will on their father's part - and are rescued by their only sister, who must undergo some radical ordeal on their behalf. She must keep silent, she must not laugh, she must make little shirts for them, she must risk being burnt at the stake as a witch, until the time comes when they may be released. "The Twelve Brothers" is the most complex of these three, and is noteworthy because the brothers are to be killed by their parents - who are having twelve creepy little coffins made in secret, each with a little death pillow in it - if the expected thirteenth baby is a girl, because the king wants her alone to inherit. So much for the supposed universal sexism of fairy tales.

Two of the most compelling bird-transformation tales are "The Juniper Tree" and "Fitcher's Bird". In ordering their collection, the Grimm brothers placed them back to back, as if they knew the two had something to do with each other. "The Juniper Tree" features one of the most memorable of evil stepmothers - memorable not only because she's so well-rendered, but because at the end you actually feel sorry for her.

In this story, it's not Snow White who is as red as blood and as white as snow. Instead it's a little boy, who is wished into being when his mother cuts her finger and sees the red blood on the white snow, and who is born after an especially lyrical passage detailing each month of his mother's pregnancy, which parallels the springtime, the summer, and the ripening fruit of the juniper tree that stands outside her house. This, then, is to be a year-boy, called into being by blood on the snow, nourished by the growing seasons, and doomed to sacrifice. I didn't think this as a child, of course. I was just sad when the mother died.

The father marries again, and the stepmother favours her own daughter. They tend to, in the world of the Grimms. She thinks of ways to get rid of the little boy so her daughter can inherit everything, and finally entices him to a large chest where she keeps apples and suggests he pick out an apple for himself. (It's apple time, autumn time, end of the road for little year-boys.) Then she lets the sharp lid fall on his neck, and off comes his head. Terrified by what she has done, she sets the boy's head back on the body, winds a handkerchief around the neck, puts an apple in his hand, and fools her daughter into giving him a box on the ear when he won't speak to her.

(In the early sixties I published a poem based on this story, which began, "I keep my brother's head among the apples." My friend Beverly, who worked at the same market-research company as I did, has recently confessed to me that she came across this poem and was badly frightened by it. She didn't know about the original story; she thought I might just be too weird for words. Such are the hazards of mythopoetry.)

The story continues. What is to be done with the dead boy, so as to conceal the awful deed from his father? The poor little girl

is in an agony of sorrow and guilt, as she thinks she's done it, and the mother lets her think so. (*Sauve qui peut.*) Nothing for it but to make the boy into black-puddings, bones and all. At dinner, the father gobbles up everything, declaring that this is the most delicious food he's ever tasted. But Marlinchen, the sister, gathers up all the bones and ties them into her best silk handkerchief, and carries them outside, "weeping tears of blood." (Those tears of blood haunted me as a child; I could picture them all too well, and certainly hoped I would never weep any.) She buries them under the juniper tree, where the dead mother is already buried; and the tree which is really the mother gives birth to her son again, this time in the form of a bird:

"... the juniper tree began to stir itself, and the branches parted asunder, and moved together again, just as if someone were rejoicing... At the same time a mist seemed to arise from the tree, and at the centre of this mist it burned like fire, and a beautiful bird flew out of the fire singing magnificently ... and when he was gone, the juniper tree was just as it had been before, and the handkerchief with the bones was no longer there. Marlinchen, however, was as gay and happy as if her brother were still alive."

Which he is, but in a soul-form. He sings a song, which recounts his own murder, the way he was cannibalized, and how his bones were gathered together and buried under the juniper tree; his song is so splendid that it compels all who hear it to listen, and to reward him for singing it a second time. In this way he collects a golden chain from a goldsmith, a pair of red shoes from a shoemaker, and a millstone from a miller. Then he returns home and sings to entice his family members outside. The father is rewarded with the gold chain and the sister with the red shoes. The stepmother, who by this time is in a state of extreme terror, with her hair standing up "like flames of fire" - only she, it appears, knows who the bird really is and what the words of his song signify - is compelled to rush outside as well, and is crushed by the millstone. Pyrotechnics occur, one dead person is exchanged for another, and when the smoke clears there is the little brother again; he takes the hands of his father and sister, and

in a spirit of joy and renewal, and not at all disconcerted by the fiery end of the wife of one and the mother of another, they all go into the house and eat. They year boy has been resurrected, and the story fittingly concludes with a feast. (The first mother however is not restored. She remains a tree. As a child, I experienced that as an omission.)

What I liked about this story - and about all the stories in which people were changed into birds and then changed back - is that there was in fact a formula for changing them back. They could be *brought* back, out of that other form within which their real selves were concealed. At some level it did not escape me that those changed into birds, in fairy tales, were in fact not just changed but dead. The swan brothers had evaded their little coffins only to be put into coffins of another sort - they were imprisoned in the bodies of an alien species. At that time I knew nothing about the many legends and the many cultures in which the souls of the dead become birds of various kinds; but I knew that the people transformed to birds in these stories were dead people, and that the act involved in changing them back to human beings was an act not only of metamorphosis but of resurrection. The white feathery swan bodies are shed like shrouds as the brothers step back into the ordinary light of daily life.

Nor was it lost on me that in most of the tales I've mentioned, the rescuer was a sister. I was a sister myself, and was pleased to be assigned such an active role. For others - for brothers - the transformation into swans; for me, the task of knitting little shirts in order to magic these swan-brothers back from the dead. All my skill and tenacity would be needed, but if I stuck at it long enough I would get results.

Why was I interested in bringing the dead back to life? Most children are, especially if they've known someone who has died, or who has threatened to. Their understanding of death doesn't usually go so far as non-being; especially at a time when children were told that dead people had gone to Heaven, or had gone away, or had become angels, children were not likely to believe that a dead person was not; instead they believed that the dead were somewhere else, or possibly something else. Dying was a

major - the major - form of transformation. It meant that the dead went away, right out of their bodies, and who knows what shape they might assume then? In any case, wherever or whatever they were, they could no longer speak to you, they could no longer communicate. (Hence, no doubt, the fairy-tale prohibition against speaking, for so many of those who assume the task of rescue: the rescuer has to identify partially with the one to be rescued - has to have, as it were, one foot in the grave.)

I wasn't much worried about dying myself; I didn't consider it likely. But I was worried about others. My father gave me no concern; he was dependable, and appeared to be quite solidly planted on this earth; but not so my mother and my brother. For the most part it was mothers and brothers who died in the stories, not fathers and daughters, and my mother and my brother seemed more likely candidates. When I was nine, my mother had been carted off to the hospital under mysterious circumstances involving blood. My brother had almost drowned - when I was too young to remember, but I'd been told about it - and had narrowly avoided death by lightning, an event I'd witnessed; so he didn't seem to me to have an unchallenged grip on life. Should he slip away somehow, or should my mother vanish a second time in an ambulance, it would be useful to know what to do. Or to know that there was something to be known, if only I could find it out; some cave to descend into, something to weave, a set of instructions to follow; a way of calling back. Resurrection is an idea which is very attractive to children. It means that nothing and nobody will ever be permanently lost. So this was the appeal of "The Juniper Tree".

"Fitcher's Bird" was quite different. It concerns a wizard who takes the form of a poor man and goes begging, carrying a large basket on his back. Those who give him bread, and whom he touches, are forced to jump into his basket. His victims are pretty girls, and when he hits a family with three of them in it, he starts off with the eldest.

Once in his basket, she is carried away to his magnificent house in the middle of a dark forest. Here she is showered with "whatsoever she could possibly desire", until the day when he says

he has to go away on a visit, and hands her the keys to the house - along with an egg, which is to be carefully preserved, and a command that she shall not enter one forbidden room. Of course she does enter it; and when she sees that it contains an axe, and a large basin full of blood, and the cut-up bodies of previous curious girls, she drops the egg in terror. It falls into the basin, and the bloodstains will not come off it. Back comes the wizard, demanding keys and egg; when he sees the evidence of the girl's disobedience, it's off with her head and other appendages, and into the basin she goes.

It's the same with the second pretty sister; but the third one is "clever and wily." After the wizard leaves the house, this girl puts the egg away carefully on a shelf, and not until then does she examine the forbidden room. She's horrified to discover her two sisters cut into pieces; but when she puts them together in the right order, the pieces join themselves together and the girls come alive again (thus recapitulating the behaviour of slaughtered and eaten prey animals when their bones are set in order, in the ancient shamanistic rituals of northern Europe; but I didn't know that as a child). The third sister hides her two revived siblings, and awaits the wizard's return.

When he sees the spotless egg, he declares that the third girl has passed the test: first prize, marriage to him. But somehow he has lost his former powers over her, and is "forced to do whatever she wished." (Once the question is popped, it's wedding-rehearsal time, and the former Svengali turns instantly into a Ken doll.) The girl orders him to carry a basketful of gold to her parents; but in the basket she hides her two sisters. She warns the wizard that she'll have her eye on him, and will know if he's slacking. Every time the poor man sits down to rest, one of the sisters orders him to go on, and the unfortunate man thinks it's his bride-to-be nagging.

Meanwhile the girl is keeping busy. She takes a skull - there must have been plenty lying around - and dresses it up in bridal ornaments and flowers, and sets it in a window, looking out. Then she gets into a barrel of honey, and after that she rolls in the contents of a feather-bed, until she looks like a "wondrous bird."

Thus disguised, she makes her escape from the forest. On her way she encounters the wizard's friends, going to the wedding; when questioned by them, she replies with a bird-like song, which instructs them to look up at the house and see the bride peeping out of the window. Even the wizard is fooled. When all the wizardly crew is in the house, the "brothers and kinsmen" of the girl arrive, summoned by the two sisters, and burn down the house, with the whole evil crew inside it.

This is of course a version of the Bluebeard story. When I came across the Perrault rendition a couple of years later, I was somewhat disappointed. Although there's the added feature of a blue beard - the "Fitcher's Bird" wizard lacks this growth - I found the story somewhat preachy, with various tut-tuts about female curiosity. Also there's a Sister Anne present in the house - who invited *her*, I wondered - and the heroine is powerless to help herself, but after many tears and considerable whining, must be rescued by her brothers. Brothers feature in "Fitcher's Bird", too - in stories as in real life, they're useful for setting fires - but not until the very end, when the clever third sister has outsmarted the wizard and has made her escape through the forest, alone, with the aid of nothing but wits and guts and a talent for improvised costumes. Nobody raps *her* knuckles for being curious.

Not everyone prefers the Grimms' variant to the Perrault: Marina Warner, in her fairy-tale *magnum opus*, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, calls the Grimms' story "a rummage bag", "eerie, volatile and curiously unfocussed socially and politically;" (p. 255), and there are indeed some puzzling things in it. Who, for instance, is Fitcher? Why does the heroine disguise herself as a bird? Why the egg? None of these things troubled my sleep as a child - "Fitcher" was obviously the name of the wizard, an egg was a good choice as a tell-tale object, since stains are notoriously difficult to get off an egg - I knew this from Easter-egg painting - and a bird seemed as good a disguise as any, although I did wonder whether the girl dipped herself in the honey with or without her own clothes on; without, I suspected.

However, as an adult I had second thoughts. Marina Warner calls the bloody egg "a queasy female symbol," (p. 255), which it

well may be; but it's also a queasy male one, as I learned from my German publisher. The story had stayed with me, and over the years I'd written several variations on it, including a story called "Bluebeard's Egg", which also became the title of a story collection; but this title could not be directly translated into German, as "eggs" in German is a slang word for "testicles", and the title would have meant "Bluebeard's Testicle", or something more like "Bluebeard's Single Ball", which would not - I was assured - have been dignified. In this light the egg in the story can be seen as the repository of the man's sexual honour, and the entry into the forbidden room and the dirtying of the egg is not only disobedience - a Pandora curiosity-thy-name-is-woman motif - but sexual treachery. The man, wizard or not, is still a man, and like most men is seeking a bride who will be true to him and not besmirch his eggs. Thus his motive for chopping up the egg-dirtying girls: they've sullied his honour. Eggs can be many other things as well, but it seems to me that a reading of this particular story should include the testicle connection.

As for the name: the wizard's name in German is not "Fitcher", but "Fichter". A search through my German dictionary gave me no "Fichter" as a noun, but it did give me "ficht" as a past tense of the irregular verb "fechten", to fight, and "fechten gehen", to go begging. (The English "fight" and "fetch" are probably relatives of this verb.) Since the wizard disguises himself as a beggar, I'd guess that the meaning of "Fichter", in the context of the story, lies somewhere in this area.

But what about the girl's own disguise? Hers is actually twofold: as a "wondrous bird" - like the dead boy's other form in "The Juniper Tree" - and as her *alter ego*, the decked-out death's head posing as her bridal self which is an integral part of the deception, and thus of the girl's successful flight. Take the wizard's house "in a dark forest" as the realm of death, with the wizard as a sort of Pluto who carries Persephone-maidens off to it. Then what you have is a girl who is forced to enter the place of death, and acquires a bodily death-form which she leaves behind her (the befloored skull, appropriate as it is indeed to Death who is the wizard's ultimate bride), and a soul-form (the wondrous bird).

Then she makes good her own escape, and - presumably after a good hot shower - her return to human form. In fact, she accomplishes her own resurrection. It's a powerful feat, and if this is how it's done, we should all start collecting honey and feather-beds immediately.

Why do souls so often become birds, rather than something else? They can of course take the form of other creatures as well - frogs, bears, foxes, trees, butterflies, and so forth; though such things as slugs and hookworms are not favoured. Birds and souls, however, seem to have a natural affinity: it must be the airiness, the seeming weightlessness, the wings, the singing. But according to Carlo Ginsburg, all animal and bird forms in myth and folk tradition exist in a borderland - the borderland between the world of the living and the world of the dead. One of the great tasks of the ancient shamans was to send the soul out of the body, after which it could assume animal form and visit the world of the dead. What for? To gather information useful to the world of the living (which is what Odysseus, Aeneas and Dante are also up to); or to commune once more with those who have become *incommunicado* - with the loved and the lost. Consider Orpheus.

These bird-transformation stories of Grimm's are thus part of a much larger structure. The sisters who take a vow of silence and who knit and conjure their brothers back from the twilight life-death borderland of animal forms, the questers who enter the dark death-houses of witches and wizards in order to rescue their beloveds, or else to rescue themselves, inherit a long tradition; as we do when, as children, we hear and claim these stories.

According to Carlo Ginsburg in *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, "going to the beyond, returning from the beyond" is not just one motif among many: it is the *ur-motif*, the "elementary narrative nucleus" which "has accompanied humanity for thousands of years." The "participation in the world of the living and of the dead, in the sphere of the visible and the invisible," is "a distinctive trait of the human species." (p. 307)

No wonder then that these bird-stories, these stories of the

journey into death and back from it, intrigued me as a child. They are part of the story that has intrigued us all, as human beings, for much longer than anyone can remember.

Books cited:

Ginsburg, Carlo, *Ecstasies. Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, Penguin Books. New York, 1992.

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