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The Singing Bones

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The Singing Bones

Artist's Note

Like many children, I knew the stories of the Brothers Grimm primarily as visual images: Disney movies, of course, as well as a number of elaborately illustrated books from my family's local library. Scenes of green forests, snow, mountains, and castles could not have been further from my childhood reality, growing up in Western Australia, but they were all wonderfully exotic and escapist.

It's only as an adult that I've really come to appreciate these tales for their complexity, ambiguity, and endurance. As a writer and artist, I often wonder if my own stories will have much staying power and frequently look to older examples for inspiration and instruction, "breaking bread with the dead," as Auden put it. In the case of successful fairy tales—those that we continue to remember and retell—there's a sense that the separation between waking and dreaming worlds is actually quite thin. Strung between the real and unreal, the literal and absurd, these tales of nameless princes, peasants, stepsisters, and witches remain constantly intriguing, not least because they are often disturbing and hard to explain.

The same is true of the best folk art, and in creating my own sculptures I was much inspired by Inuit stone carvings and pre-Columbian clay figurines (following trips to Canada and Mexico, respectively). These exhibit a wonderful blend of whimsy and seriousness, and a well-considered marriage of earthy material infused with weightless and magical ideas. The result is a kind of fossilized narrative, worn by multiple "tellings" into a comfortable shape that often fits nicely in the hand. Faces and gestures are abbreviated, just like characters in the tales themselves. A child is a red hood, a sleeping woman requires no body, and a queen's face can be eroded away by the force of a single, elemental feeling: jealousy. What matters above all else are the bones of the story, and I wanted many of these objects to appear as if they've emerged from an imaginary archaeological dig and then illuminated only briefly in the dark galleries of our collective subconscious. Like the tales themselves, they might brighten in our imagination without surrendering any of their original enigma.

Each image appears alongside an excerpt from its companion tale, translated from the German by Jack Zipes.



THE WHITE SNAKE

The servant, while removing the king's dish, was overcome by curiosity. He took it into his room, and after he had carefully locked the door, he lifted the cover and found a white snake lying inside. Once he laid eyes on it, he had an irresistible desire to taste it. So he cut off a little piece and put it in his mouth. No sooner did his tongue touch it than he heard a strange whispering of exquisite voices outside his window. He went over to it to listen and noticed some sparrows talking to one another, telling what they had seen in the fields and forest. Tasting the snake had given him the power to understand the language of animals.



ALL FUR

“Go see what kind of beast has hidden itself in that hollow tree,” the king said to his huntsmen.

The huntsmen obeyed the king’s command, and when they returned to him, they said, “There’s a strange animal lying there asleep. We’ve never seen anything like it. Its skin is made up of a thousand different kinds of fur.”

“See if you can catch it alive,” said the king. “Then tie it to the wagon, and we’ll take it with us.”

When the huntsmen seized the creature, it woke up in a fright and cried to them, “I’m just a poor girl, forsaken by my mother and father! Please have pity on me and take me with you.”

“You’ll be perfect for the kitchen, All Fur,” they said. “Come with us, and you can sweep up the ashes there.”



LITTLE BROTHER AND LITTLE SISTER

“Oh, brother!” the sister exclaimed. “Please don’t drink from the spring, or you’ll be turned into a deer and run away from me.” But the brother, who was already kneeling at the spring, leaned over and drank some of the water. Immediately after a few drops had touched his lips, he lay there in the form of a fawn. The sister began weeping over her poor bewitched brother, and the little fawn wept too. Finally the girl said, “Hush, my dear little fawn. No matter what happens, I shall never forsake you.”



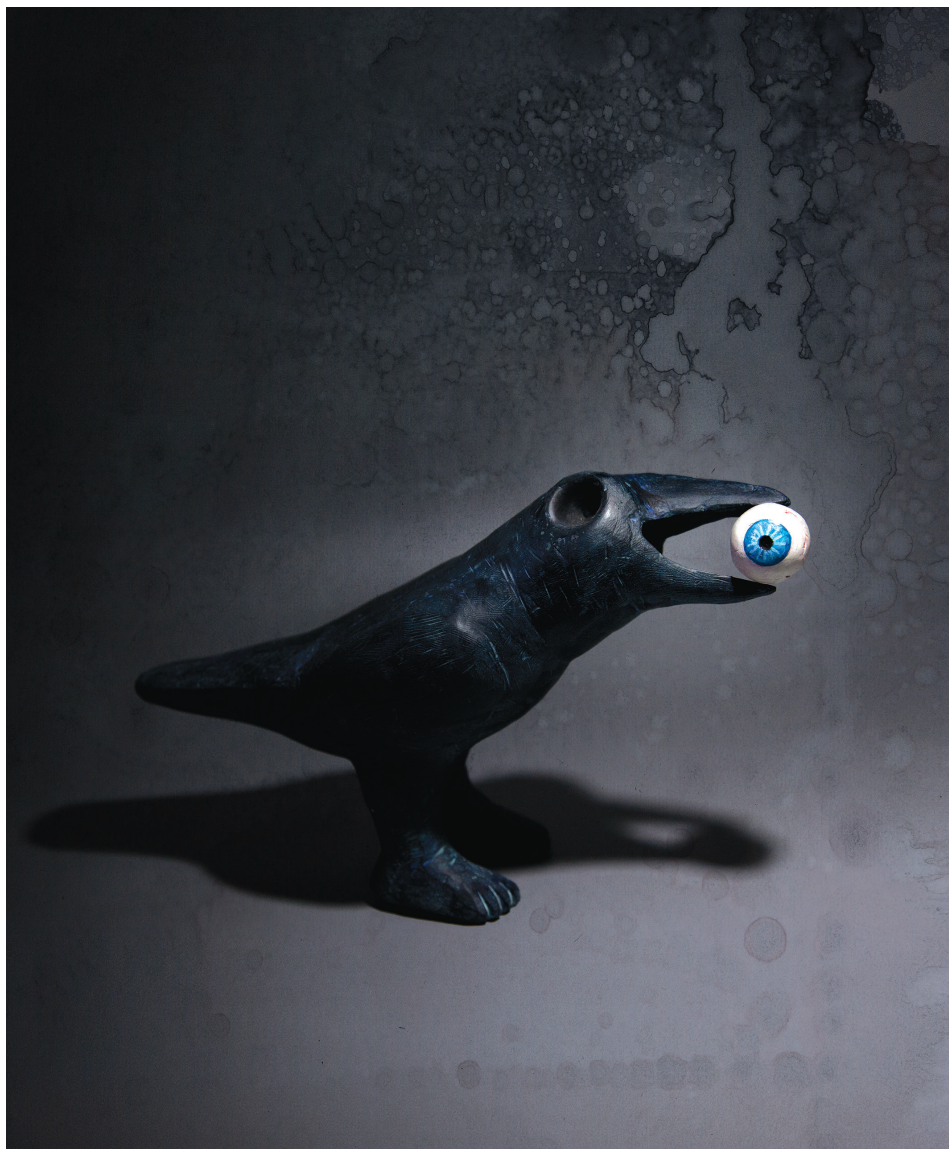
RAPUNZEL

Rapunzel grew to be the most beautiful child under the sun. But when she was twelve years old, the sorceress locked her in a tower that was in a forest. It had neither door nor stairs, only a little window high above. Whenever the sorceress wanted to visit her, she would stand below and call out, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair."



THE TURNIP

The farmer did not know what to do with the turnip, nor did he know whether it would bring him luck or misfortune. Finally, he thought, If you sell it, you won't get anything worth much. And, if you eat it, you might as well eat the small turnips, which are just as good. The best thing would be to bring it to the king. That way you can honor him with a gift.



THE RIDDLE

“Bring this to your master,” said the witch as she handed the servant a parting drink. But at that moment the glass broke, the poison splattered on the servant’s horse, and it was so lethal the animal fell down dead on the spot. The servant ran after his master and told him what had happened, but the prince didn’t want to abandon his saddle, so he sent the servant back to fetch it. When he came to the dead horse, a raven was already sitting there and eating it. “Who knows if we’ll be able to find anything better to eat today?” said the servant, and so he killed the raven and took it with him.



BRIAR ROSE

The very moment she felt the prick of the spindle, the beautiful princess was overcome by a deep sleep. This sleep soon spread throughout the entire palace. The king and queen had just returned home, and when they entered the hall, they fell asleep, as did all the people of their court. Then the horses in the stable, the dogs in the courtyard, the pigeons on the roof, and the flies on the wall. Even the fire flickering in the hearth became quiet and fell asleep. The roast stopped sizzling, and the cook, who was just about to pull the kitchen boy's hair because he had done something wrong, let him go and fell asleep. Finally, the wind died down so that not a single leaf stirred on the trees outside the castle.



LITTLE RED CAP

“Oh, Grandmother, what big ears you have!”

“The better to hear you with.”

“Oh, Grandmother, what big hands you have!”

“The better to grab you with.”

“Oh, Grandmother, what a terribly big mouth you have!”

“The better to eat you with!”



THE MOON

When the moon was reassembled in the underworld, where darkness had always reigned, the dead became restless and awoke from their sleep. They were astounded to find that they could see again: the moonlight was as bright as the sun to their weak eyes. They got up, became merry, and assumed their old ways of life again. Some began to play and dance. Others went to the taverns, where they asked for wine, got drunk, brawled, and quarreled. The noise became greater and greater until it finally reached as far as heaven.



THUMBLING

“How sad that we have no children!” said the poor farmer. “It’s so quiet here, and other homes are full of noise and life.”

“Yes,” his wife responded with a sigh. “If only we had a child, just one, even if it were tiny and no bigger than my thumb, I’d be quite satisfied. We’d surely love him with all our hearts.”

Now it happened that the wife fell sick, and after seven months she gave birth to a child that was indeed perfect in every way but no bigger than a thumb.

“It’s just as we wished,” they said, “and he shall be dear to our hearts.”



THE TWELVE BROTHERS

Once upon a time a king and queen lived together peacefully and had twelve children, all boys. One day the king said to his wife, "When you give birth to our thirteenth child and it's a girl, the twelve boys must be put to death so she may have all the wealth and the kingdom for herself." He even had twelve coffins made and filled with wood shavings. Each was fitted with a death pillow, and all the coffins were locked in a room. The king gave the key to the queen and ordered her never to say one word about this to anyone. She then sat and lamented the entire day, until her youngest son asked her, "Dear Mother, why are you so sad?"



FITCHER'S BIRD

Finally, she came to the forbidden door. She wanted to walk past it, but curiosity got the better of her. She put the key into the lock, and the door sprang open. But what did she see when she entered? There was a large bloody basin in the middle of the room, and it was filled with dead people who had been chopped to pieces. Next to the basin was a block of wood with a glistening axe on top of it.