

A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh:
A Novel and Exegesis Exploring the Numinous
Feminine, The Interior Journey and Sites of
Resistance within a Patriarchal World



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VOLUME ONE

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A knowledge of spirit and
flesh : a novel and exegesis
exploring the numinous



This thesis is in two parts - a novel *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, and an accompanying exegesis.

Volume One comprises the creative component of the thesis, the novel *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* which forms eighty per cent of the thesis.

Volume Two comprises the theoretical component of the thesis, an exegesis which explores specific theoretical and literary paradigms with particular reference to *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*.

A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh: A Novel and Exegesis

**Exploring the Numinous Feminine, the Interior Journey and
Sites of Resistance within a Patriarchal World**

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A Research Thesis in two volumes submitted in total fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS FOR EXAMINATION

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Thesis Title: *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh: A Novel and Exegesis Exploring the Numinous Feminine, the Interior Journey and Sites of Resistance within a Patriarchal World*

Abstract: The thesis comprises the novel *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, and an exegesis that locates the novel within three major theoretical strands - female spirituality, the 'interior journey' and *écriture féminine* - and shows their relevance to the novel.

A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh is set in Reformation Slovakia in 1643, and fictionalises actual events of the time. These occurred in the city of Bratislava, and focussed on the laundry-maid Regina Fischer, brutally haunted by a malicious ghost intent on releasing his soul from purgatory. The novel tells the story of Regina and the Catholic priest sent to write down her story to save her from a witchcraft accusation by the Lutherans of the city. The novel explores themes of resistance, both political and personal, within a context of religious tension.

The exegesis scrutinises *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* in relation to feminist, numinous and writing theorisations. The exegesis is centrally concerned with the notion of 'feminism/patriarchy', and its implications for feminist fiction and theory. The exegesis asks: how can the female fiction writer transcend the stalemate of 'feminism/patriarchy' in her work? The exegesis explores three key paradigms - the numinous feminine, the 'interior journey' and *écriture féminine* - as sites of resistance outside the patriarchal Symbolic Order, and thus posits an alternative framework to that upon which many current feminist theories are based.

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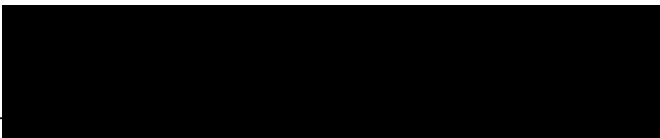
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My thanks also to the Victoria University of Technology for their financial support and administrative skills throughout my candidature, in particular Jane Trewin and Teah Farrugia.

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby certify that this thesis - the novel *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* and the accompanying exegesis - is my own research and original written work. This thesis has not been submitted previously for any other academic award.

The content of this thesis is the result of work carried out since the official date of commencement of the program.

Signed: 

Date:  26/03/2002

Prologue

When I was a child, my grandmother taught me this prayer:

O Maria, Breite Deine Mantel Aus,

Mache Schutz und Schirm Daraus

Lass uns Kinder darunterstehen

und Alle gefahren vorüber gehen.

She told me that it was an exceptionally sacred incantation, and could be used at any time to ask for the Holy Mother's help against particularly nasty situations. It was a prayer I have spoken over and over for most of my life, and I never gave much thought to it; indeed, it became a mechanic utterance, a cipher that just tripped off my tongue every night. I noticed, though, that my mother used this prayer often. I'm not sure she ever noticed me noticing her, but there were times when she had tears in her eyes that I could swear these words were going through her mind. It was no mystery, just a familial rite that was entrenched in the Slovak side of my family.

Years later, after layers and layers of stories of the mythic land had unraveled and the internal and external walls had come down, and my family and I returned to the 'old country', I discovered the truth behind this prayer.

With a characteristic insensitivity, I insisted that I (at least) was going to make the journey back. I had ambitions, and ideas, a goals to achieve, and no-one was going to prevent me. My father joined me, and somehow my mother decided to come with us, despite several attempts to prevent this journey. Even up until the very last moment there was trepidation; we sat together at the terminal at Bangkok, holding hands. My mother's grip was strong, and wet, and she was sweating as the Èesky

Aerolinky plane rolled up to the gate. *I don't want to do this*, she said. *I don't want to go back. I'm not getting on that plane.*

I didn't know what to say. My breath caught for a moment, and all I could manage was *But the plane's here. We've already paid for it all.*

And after I had pulled my mother onto the plane and we had flown over the miles of desert to come to the centre of Europe, and in the heat and flush of the successful return, we found ourselves in the town of my mother's birth, surrounded by the people with whom she had shared a childhood, and a war.

On a Sunday, we climbed a mountain to Bratislava's castle, and as we stood overlooking the city, the bells of all the churches tolled, one after another, peal after peal reverberating through the cobblestoned town, through the golden autumn air and washing in waves over the high castle. I believed that I was in heaven.

Afterwards, we climbed back down to the town and wandered the narrow streets. I felt as though I was in a maze, although my mother strode confidently, and even was asked directions by a native of this city. When we came to a lane that travelled along the side of yet another church we stopped, and my mother stood transfixed.

That's it, she pointed down the lane. *That window there, with the bars on it. That's the window to the drying room where we hid.*

I looked down the lane. It was ordinary, dark, dry and gritty, and a huge skip sat in the middle of it loaded with dusty rubbish. A tremor ran through me, although a part of me was aghast at the ordinariness of the whole place. This was the site where our *O Maria* reached its meaning. This was a sacred place, a place where a family miracle had occurred. I had heard the story before.

During the war, my mother and her mother were living in Bratislava with an aunt, the sister of my mother's father. My mother's father had gone away - somewhere, no-one wants to say where - to avoid being drafted into the Slovak pro-Hitler Hlinka's Guard, which was responsible for the deportation of Jews. It was a family of women, mothers and daughters, living in a city under war. After the war the retributions started. A witch-hunt began, targeting all things German. My mother's mother was a Sudetendeutsch; a part of Bohemia which had been settled by a German minority for thousands of years and which had been annexed to the Reich. My mother's mother was being hunted down.

Another aunt, a nun, took the little girl and her mother to hide in a walled-up convent in the city. This convent was known for baptizing Jewish children and thus preventing their deportation. One night this nun, this aunt, woke the two and, forcing them into the dark drying room, told them to repeat the *O Maria* in silence. The two were sitting behind the last drying rack, pressed close into a corner against the wall, holding hands, praying.

(O Maria, Breite Deine Mantel Aus,

Mache Schutz und Schirm Daraus

Lass uns Kinder darunterstehen

und Alle gefahren vorüber gehen)

The door was wrenched open, and the unfamiliar sound of men's boots clattered into this drying room. Probably the sound of the nuns' shoes could be heard behind the boots, and a tense whispering. The room was filled with the stench of mansweat, overriding the smell of soap and laundry. Rough hands began to pull the drying racks out, one by one.

I would imagine that at this time the silent prayer would have sounded louder and louder in heaven. I would also imagine that my grandmother had her hand over my mother's mouth and that she was waiting to be found, to be exposed, cowering behind a drying rack with a terrorized child in her arms.

(O Maria, Breite Deine Mantel Aus,

Mache Schutz und Schirm Daraus

Lass uns Kinder darunterstehen

und Alle gefahren vorüber gehen)

One after another, the drying racks were pulled out, splintering. The blood smell of the witch hunt hung in the air, and my grandmother counted the slam in and out of each rack, felt the rattle of the frames as it came closer to her.

(und Alle gefahren vorüber gehen)

Perhaps one of the nuns whispered *But there's nothing in there*, perhaps not. The second last rack was slammed in and out, someone grunted, and the boots clattered out of the room. Someone pressed the drying room door shut. My grandmother and my mother were left in the dark.

And this is one of our family miracles. And this is how I know that this prayer is so powerful.

*

The story with which I opened this narration is not a fairy-tale; it happened, and within living memory to tangible people. The focus of the story - as I heard it from the mouths of my grandmother and mother - is not in the danger, the threat of

death, the politics involved with post-war fury and retribution. The centre, the beating heart of this tale revolves around mystery, divine intervention, the protection offered by an energy which is the essential opposite of that of war. The circle of the story relies on feminine energies; nun, mother, daughter, granddaughter, *O Maria*; energies which are located in a zone away from that of the official world, which Elaine Showalter identifies within her system of gynocriticism as a 'wild zone';

The tale of the miracle described here is from a pure female voice; separated from males, occurring to females in a female environment (the convent), protected by female spiritual energies (nuns, *O Maria*) told from grandmother and mother to granddaughter, this story completes the circular idea of tale-telling and female location, and begins to explore around and question the act of patriarchal narrative and the patriarchal lens through which the world is displayed to us. The 'fantasy of her original voice' in this story allows a large shift away from the dualistic idea of separate material and numinous realities [that rarely collide, and when they do, represent some sort of otherworldly experience] and begins to engage with a feminine voice that presupposes the melding of these two worlds as a matter of course; thus already dispensing with the philosophically accepted discourse of dualism.

But the feminine voice, I am discovering, is tricky. Where exactly does this voice lie? Where is she hidden, what are her sounds? What words does she utilize? Does she, in fact, use words at all or does she communicate to us in other means? And how, then, do these other means translate to literature and the act of pinning words down to paper, capturing something so ineffable and containing her in black and

white, strokes of ink upon paper, and even more removed, flickers of electricity through a cathode ray screen?

Let me, then, tell you another story.

*

I grew up with four transplanted souls. Two of them escaped Terror and came away to a place 'as far away as possible, the other side of the world.' The other two came later, not really running, more in retirement, to be with family, not to be so alone towards the end of life. And all of these people had memories, stories, longings, hatreds, loves and endless webs of mythical reality spun around them. And in exile, these webs grew around me from my birth in their foreign land, their lucky - or lonely - country.

[When my grandfather grew crazed with Alzheimer's disease after his wife's death he would wander the streets of my Melbourne suburb, believing himself to be still in Bratislava, and would converse with his beloved sister, the nun.]

Before I could speak English, I was listening to stories of the *old country*. I was more conversant with legends of an impossible place before I went to school, and learned that my myths were irrelevant in the wider scheme of things. [I was never very interested in the cats that sat on the mat, or endless afternoons on the cricket pitch and longed, rather, for castles and dark forests and strange vowels. The other children were never very interested in *me*.] I would rush home as soon as possible to return to this invisible world that poured from the mouth of my grandmother, and

would comfort myself again and again with her retelling of her childhood adventures, her schooldays amongst Gothic ruins and geese. They were always a little different every time. The insemination of a constantly changing vision within my imagination became an important, mellifluous skill that carried over through adolescence into my adult life. I was not disappointed when I finally came to this land to which I was taught I could never return. As with the Sunday church bells on Bratislava Hill, the small lanes where miracles occur, the sights, smells, airs, and vibrations of the place of myths held a particular magic for me, and this return slowly began to erase the tint of fear that was always at the edge of memory.

It was as we walked these streets for hours on end that the stories I had been told in my childhood began to return to our lips. Narratives tumbled out as we walked, and my mother would point and say *There, that's where it happened. On that spot, in that house.* And between us we found one story in particular that resonated throughout this city, and between us. It was a ghost story.

Hidden within the main church of Bratislava, the Svateho Martina [St Martin's] Kostel, is a curious relic. Many years ago my grandfather begged, and on a Sunday, took his little daughter to view this obscure object, an ancient ironing board with the imprint of a hand burned into it. This imprint was said to have been made by a ghost who appeared to a laundry maid; the rest of the story came through to me in about four different versions, including another three from my Bratislava cousins. It was on that Sunday of the bells that we approached an ancient verger after High Mass; my mother, her cousin Klara and I. The verger was a small man, white haired, his suit was dusty and his face wrinkled. He blinked behind thick glasses as he told us a little of the history of the church whilst we waited for the priests to leave the sacristan. He

also mentioned, standing up a little straighter, that he was *eine echte Pressburger*, having been born in 1918, when the Hapsburgs still ruled the Great Austro-Hungarian Empire. He had survived Nazism, Communism and now Capitalism. And then he took us through the sacristy, filled with the paraphernalia of priestly duties, through a small stone doorway and up a dark set of winding stone steps that were hollowed down by centuries of feet. We entered another room, with a creaking wooden floor and a high stone ceiling. The walls were lined with dusty cloth-covered objects, some big, some small, some of strange, pointed, asymmetrical shapes. I felt myself fall through a timewarp, and became scared that there was something malign looking down at us from the lightless, cobwebbed cornices of this stone ceiling. (It was an elemental fear, although my scientifically rational twentieth century mind was letting me know I was only projecting my subconscious illusions which were compounded by the childhood imprintings of my terror-haunted family.)

The verger knelt down and swept a cloth away from something, leaving a dust cloud that surrounded us. He pried open the wings of a cracked wooden triptych, and stood back up, holding out this object for us.

It was so dry, and the burned wood that formed the hand's shape seemed a scar. Fine cloth sagged around the shape, pinned to the wood with brass pins; it was grey, thin with age, and it was difficult recognizing it for what once was thick white hemp-cloth. The edges of this cloth were seared, but the ash must have fallen away many years ago, leaving an edge in the cloth which was not quite torn, not quite burned, but rubbed away by age.

I was seized with the notion that if I took a photograph of this thing, the film would emerge as a blank; I put my camera down on the floor and crouched down

before this antique ironing board. I could feel my body pulling towards this odd thing, this relic of women's work. As I reached towards it, my fingertips started to burn, a heat emanating from the scorch marks in front of me. I hesitated, my hand not wanting to feel this heat, filled with past visions of irons and piles of garments, but my arm shot out and touched the edge of the dry old wood. I took a deep breath.

The air around me was still; it hung in a way that it could not in sea-windy Melbourne. Even though the room was filled with life (tangible or otherwise), there was no sound, no breath, no movement. I was aware of a buzzing in my head, and the edges of my vision began to shimmer and waver. I slipped between worlds, held suspended by the conversation that began to emerge in my aural field now. A duet, a rondeau for two voices, a discourse, an argument; a man and a woman.

*

Part I

The Private Diary of a GhostWriter

12th July 1642

Here I sit. It is late, I am tired, and there is so much work to be done. I write, in the name of Michael Kopchani, the Syrmien Bishop and Probus of Pressburg, this tale. In my own name - I have no name in this story. I am merely the conduit that this tale passes through. From the lips of the laundry maid to my waiting ears, into my head, and through my arm and fingers in ink onto the parchment. I listen, and I write. There is nothing of myself in this story. I am the scribe. But a spirit moves me to document this process. *My* own process. Ultimately, the finished work that I produce will only consist of a tenth of the actual work involved. If I do not write down how I go about this work, the birthing pains of my labour will be lost. Even if no-one reads this work but myself, it will smooth the process of shaping the final product; it will make sense of this mess to *me*, and I need this now more than with any other task I have undertaken before.

I am no fledgling scribe; I am important to this process. Without me this gabble would make no sense. I alone can take these tangled threads of speech - tangled between the peasant Slovak, noble Hungarian and formal German tongues - and straighten them into the purity of Church Latin. A good, smooth story that starts at the beginning and continues through an ordered scenario until there comes a crisis and a final conclusion. That, of course, ends happily for all.

At least that is the way that I would like it to be. It would make my task less of a burden. That, and a supply of quality candles. I do not understand how they can

assume that I can write their narrative with just peasant-standard tallow and not ruin my eyesight. I am, after all, a scribe trained in languages and writing; they need me to sort this mess out and to make everyone come out smelling of roses in the end! I have a skill that they cannot emulate, and I can't be expected to exercise this skill for them with inferior working conditions. I am young, and I have my whole lifetime of work to elevate me from this position. I cannot do that without sight!

Or perhaps, when they see the excellent qualities of this work, they plan to put out my eyes, or sever my hands so that I may never emulate this perfection again. I've heard tell of the clock-maker of Prague . . .

But I forget my humility. I am a mere scribe in God's service. I have a job to do that will emphasize His Glory upon His creation, the earth. I should be humble in the execution of this task. I should pray for clarity in my understanding and inspiration in my documentation of this account of - well, whatever it is that this story is about. My mind is not grasping the essential thread, the simplicity that God's revealed Word shows. I know that beneath these strange witness statements there lies a clear revelation. If only I could find it! There is too much to sort through, too many pages of accounts, too many different versions of events that may or may not be the same ones! I cannot differentiate who is speaking or who is describing what; there are so many gaps in these testimonies that it is impossible to piece together a coherent account of what happened!

If indeed anything this fantastic *did* actually happen.

[The young scribe lays down his pen and brings his hands to his eyes. He sighs. The tallow candles flickers and stink]

Cynicism. The old professors at the Collegium would strike a student such as I and then rave and mutter of the disgraceful tendencies these days of debate and argument in the young men. How well I remember that! I must watch for this in my disposition, must curb my childish questioning. I am no longer a student, I have learned what I need to learn. Now I am only here to execute my work, my harnessed and refined skills to do God's work. I must *trust* in Divine Wisdom; this is no fairy-tale, no figment of the imagination, no frightened girl's dream. These events *did* occur, they *are* a sign from Heaven, there *is* a lesson to be learned from them. I must not question them but go about my work with an inspired drive and a clear insight to the goal of this exercise. I *will* write this narrative so that it is shaped in the correct way and presents the perfection of the Grand Design.

I must re-read these witness statements before the morrow. I will sort out each person's words into its own separate pile and then scrutinize them even more closely. Look, there are thirty-two of these wretched documents, all at least ten pages long. I can hardly make out the writing on some of them; these apprentice scribes are unbearably lazy in their work! I can just see them sitting there as the witnesses speak, dripping ink all over the parchment, scribbling and tearing the paper - just look at this!

[The young scribe holds up a thin piece of paper to one of the candles. He frowns as the torn paper sways in the flame's smoke. An ink blot covers a whole section of writing. As he stares at the paper, its corner catches alight. The young scribe is shocked - he lets the parchment burn before he gathers his wits and slaps the

flame out with his hand. The document is now unreadable. The scribe looks to his right, then to his left, and then tears the paper into tiny pieces and burns the shreds.]

This is ridiculous. These work conditions are intolerable. I must speak to someone about the quality of their archival procedures; surely they are in need of a good overhaul, if they cannot keep the dust and the mice from destroying their documents. I will speak to the librarian tomorrow. They cannot just throw a disorganized and ill-kept set of testimonies at me and expect me to create a book of wisdom out of it over night. It is insupportable; I am the best scribe they have and they ask me to work with such dung!

The Private Diary of a GhostWriter

13th July 1642

This is a division of the witness testimonies written down for my own personal elucidation. I find that unless I scrutinize who said what I will not be able to make a judgement on the merits of each statement.

1. Grosser, Hans; 42 years, orderly of the house of Pálffy
2. Pestvármegyei, Andreas, 50 years, Priest of the Society of Jesus
3. Hailiger, Stephan, 42 years, nightwatchman
4. Hubastus vom Adel, Johann, 28 years
5. Szelepcsényi, Georg, the Reverend, 38 years
6. Schlifinger, Wolfgang, 27 years, guard
7. Fischer, Rosina
8. Hopfer, Michael, 26 years, servant in the house of Pálffy

9. Hopfer, Rosine, 34 years, his married wife
10. Bornemisza, Stefan, a youth of 13 years
11. Braun, Wilhelm, 31 years, footman in the house of Pálffy
12. Ulrich, Thomas, 21 years, 1st level undergraduate
13. Grobner, Stefan, 24 years, cook in the house of Pálffy
14. Katz, Lorenz, 24 years, another footman in the house of Pálffy
15. Richter, Stefan, 25 years
16. Sylva, Mrs Sophie, 28 years, the Housekeeper to Sir Emerich Erdödy
17. Krsanczin, Dorothea, 63 years, widow
18. Szalay, Ursula, 46 years, widow
19. the daughter of Georg Peltran, 17 years
20. Magdalena, 30 years, a daughter of Martin Schweiz
21. Aximathek, Tobias Wenczel, 28 years, tailor
22. Percsiz, Petrus, a youth from Adel, 1st level undergraduate
23. Urovics, Johann, 22 years, student
24. Scnitze, Christoph, 19 years, student
25. Fischer, Magdalena, 17 years, sister of Regina
26. Father Bures of the Franciscan Order, Lecturer of Philosophy in Pressburg
27. Father Didacus of the Franciscan Order
28. Neosuvius, Georg, 40 years, Chaplain of Pressburg
29. Scheibele, Georg, 36 years, picture artisan
30. Father P Gladisch Hyeronimus, 42 years, Priest of the Society of Jesus
31. P Nagy, Priest of the Franciscan Order
32. Fischer, Regina, 20 years, Maiden, to whom the Spirit so often appeared

These are my divisions;

Nine of these statements are made by females; I might not dwell on these accounts as in all likelihood these are the most garbled and unreliable. Females are so highly superstitious that it may be possible that their accounts could be somehow involved with the devilry that so besets the peasantry around here. Another nine of these accounts are from minions; these are not known to supply accurate *truth* - these people may be paid to speak or not, and anyway, I suspect that many of these are Slovaks and therefore mostly drunken and not reliable. That, already, is half of the accounts. A further four are from students, two of them callow 1st years, who are not to be trusted. Students generally are ignorant and inexperienced and most of what they say cannot be taken for anything much. One statement is from a youth of 13 years, it is likely that this youth may have been coached or prompted in his statement. Two are from persons of unknown profession. That, of course, is self-evident in its reliability. Only seven of these statements are taken from reliable sources, and yet, can I ever be sure that there was no *agreement* between these parties as to the content of their story?

How am I to make a faithful rendition from this pile of doubt?

[The nib of the pen hovers over the page. The scribe rests his head on this chin. A drop of ink falls onto the paper and spreads in a small blot.]

The Private Diary of a GhostWriter

13th July 1642

It is too late. I have but one candle left, and my head is pounding. Either I take a sleeping draught and end this nightmare of paper testimony or I must leave this

room and roam the night-streets. But few torches remain burning at this hour, and it is more than likely that the nightwatchmen are all drunk and sleeping. The candle is low, and I am scarcely ringed about with its light, I must hold it close to see where my ink flows onto the paper.

My work is heavy. It is as if I am constructing a story from these garbled accounts that does not catch on between events. There is too much evidence to be contained within the limits of a scholarly construction, and it is impossible to sort out that which I must include and that which is detrimental to the aims of this report. Indeed, it is difficult to decide exactly *what* may be interpreted as detrimental; the whole tale, as it is spread before me in these disagreeing gossips, seems a nonsense. How is it possible to make order from such chaos?

There must be some way of refining these stories. It is a pity that the tellers have no notions of order and hierarchy. It is almost as if they are conspiring in their accounts against the grand rationale of the Universe, the great construction that makes up our ideas and aspirations. That they are mostly the words of base, unrefined people and women puts me in mind of the lowest echelons of order, although I find it most unseemly that the testimonies of the educated men are so disordered and so conflicting. That is not as it should be, nor is it helpful in any way for my work here. I would hesitate to say that it appears as a Cosmic joke played upon me, but I am exhausted, and my mind is seething with all of these stories. I must not let my senses make of me a heretic.

Neither must I allow these words to put me in mind of Sprenger and Kramer's strange work. That two learned men should write such dark half-truths is a thought that always perplexes me. The *Malleus* is neither sound in its logic, nor balanced in its

tone, nor is it an accurate portrayal of the behaviour of men and women as I myself have observed it; although the thing was written in a darker, and more superstitious age. Praise God we now have more finely-tuned ways of argument and attention! However, as I write this, images come to my mind from that text, images that I am sure I also remember from this garbled nonsense of testimonies that lie before me now.

But I am tired. I have been working for too long, and the candle's light is too low. Strange, I almost fancy that the darkened ceiling above me hides *things* in its corners! Oh, come now scribe! What sanity lies here? You are tired, for the saints' sake, take a sleeping draught . . .

[The candle burns itself out. The scribe, left in the darkness, throws his pen down, which spills the remaining ink across the parchment. Standing up, he knocks his writing desk over with his thighs, then proceeds to shuffle through the piles of parchment that have scattered onto the floor. Cursing, albeit cautiously, the scribe feels his way to the pallet that lies in one corner of the room, lies down upon it, and fails to fall asleep.]

*

'But I cannot understand you, Miss Regina. You screech and howl like a wild thing, and your words make no sense. And stop twitching up and down like that I simply cannot understand you. I am almost tempted,' he scratches his tonsure, rough and unshaven, before he continues, 'to hand you back to the investigators of witches.'

His ink-stained fingers quiver, and the smell of the candle-fat sits in the air. He picks up his wooden stylus and drags it across the cheap parchment, a thin, scraping line.

The woman picks up her skirts and sits down on a stool. *How then, Sir, do you wish me to speak?* Her face is pale when the candle's light flickers over her skin.

'Speak like a normal person, or a servant, for Heaven's sake! You babble too much like a woman!'

She looks down at her feet. 'If only you'd take the cloth from your ears, you might hear what it is I say,' she mutters.

He looks at the paper in front of him, at the thin black marks and crossed over words and arrows pointing to this part of the page, or that, and thinks, 'Don't call *me* cloth-eared!'

She sighs, and gathers her skirts about her knees, tucking the thick wool under her legs. 'Let me, then, explain, since the pious black sackcloth stuffing your earlobes cannot filter through anything other than what it will absorb. You insist on hearing in me only that which you understand through your own dogmas, and cannot feel what it is I have to say.'

There is a scowl on his face, and he does not look back up at her. In all, he reminds her of her sister.

'I am speaking to you as a woman, since it is that which I am accused of, and in your strange reasoning, it is that which you wish to save me from. Indeed, I would like to ask of you, why are you doing this thing? What do you think writing my story will achieve?'

'My dear ' He stops when he notices the look on her face. 'Miss Regina,' he begins again, scratching his head once more. 'What has happened to you, these

apparitions; it cannot be doubted that there is material proof of your experience. Even I and my Brothers have not escaped the knowledge of this thing that is from only-God-knows-where. Look, there are still marks about your face, bruises, and the burns. Do not let us forget that you have been led by a Divine Hand to a vast sum of hidden money. But the church fathers are at a loss to explain why they have not been able to intervene in your case-'

'Yes,' she hisses.' Fat lot of good it did me, the prayers - it only made the spirit worse, didn't it?' The candlelight flickers over her face again, and he notices once again the fading green and yellow marks about her temples and cheeks.

'And let us not forget,' he rises from his seat, the rickety *escritoire* totters over the straw-strewn floor. 'Let us not forget that your religious allegiances are somewhat obscure, and that there is an accusation of witchcraft hanging over your head. Since the *instructions* of this damned soul required the lost money to be given to the true Holy Mother Church, and not that of the heretics, it is only in the Church's interest to identify and justify this action. Also, in these uncertain times, it proves the sanctity of the Catholic soul.'

'Sir, I do not understand your thinking. I am a simple woman. I only know what happened to me, I only saw these things. I do not want your scholarly 'thinking' to make something of me that is not truth. There is nothing to prove - I know what happened, and if you doubt my words, that is no concern of mine. I do not need to prove anything.' She rubs her eyes.

'Then why is it so difficult for you to simply tell me what happened? Why all this nonsense language, this strange dancing? What is it you are trying to say?'

‘Although I am nothing more than a laundry maid, as you say of uncertain religious allegiance, what has happened to me does not run in a straight line. There are many things that cannot be expressed, Sir, in what this spirit has forced me to see. I do not think you can understand this; you, a priest, you are supposed to be in touch with God, yet you have never, as you tell me, had daily intercourse with a spirit, let alone have one lay his hands on you. If I tell you what he said, and what I have seen and felt, you strangle it back to something that sounds like it comes from a church pamphlet warning young Ladies not to undress themselves on the Sabbath! How can I make you understand what it is I have seen?’ She is breathing heavily, but she leans forward, circling her knees with her arms, resting her cheek on her knee.

He clears his throat. He shuffles the skirts of his cassock over his knees. He puts his stylus down, closes the lid of the inkwell with a little click, stands and clasps his hands behind his back. ‘I think you forget, Miss Regina, that you are accused of something which I consider is a nonsense. However, despite the fact that a new era of *scholarly thinking* is about to break upon us, the accusation of witchcraft is very serious. And since you say that you are neither a Catholic nor a Protestant, you could fall into the hands of the Calvinists, who are obsessed with eradicating lower-class female witches.’

She sneers, but he ignores her and continues. ‘I realize that you imagine that I am twisting your experiences to suit an agenda which you possibly cannot understand, however there is no other way in which to express this incident in an official way. I could not possibly write it down in the way you want me to. The Church wants to be magnanimous with your case, as indeed I am considering the watch-committee’s findings. We are opposed to needless violence in the cases of so-called witches.

However, we must be seen to be considering these cases in the proper manner. We want to present the truth, but the truth in a way which the Church's enemies will see us as just, and working in the strictest accordance of Church Law. So you see, if you want me to help you, you must make me understand what it is that happened to you. So I ask you; do you want me to write your story?'

She laughs. 'I want you to write my story.' She stands up. 'I want you to put it down as it happened to me - in all its hideous glory - I want you to show them my soul, the woman's soul, not the one they say I should have. You say this apparition could only happen to a virtuous woman, and yet you say that no woman is virtuous, that we are all vipers and poisoners of the man's purity. You say that a woman's soul is perfection and vileness at once, and that very part of me which you cannot grasp must be covered over. I want you to catch my soul as it shines from my body and pin it down on your paper for all to see my truth. Don't whittle it down into a shape someone has told you it should be. I want to recognize myself on your parchment - even if I can't read Hungarian very well, and only speak Slovak well enough - I want me to reflect from these little, wet, black marks you stain the blank sheet with - I want my bride's blood to show on your white sheets, since you label me a necromancer and accuse me of horrible things -'

He stops her with a roar; 'But I cannot! I do not understand you!'

Regina snatches the stylus from the table, a splinter catching in her hand. A small drop of red, red blood makes a round, thick bubble on the side of her palm. 'Then give me the paper,' she says. 'I'll do it myself.'

The Private Diary of a GhostWriter

14th July 1642

This woman is mad. There is no rational reason behind what she talks about. It appears that she has a profound belief in the devil, who plays tricks in her presence. She claims to have had visions of our Holy Mother, yet she is convinced that I cannot save her from the stake. She is mad, she has many signs of madness, and sometimes I am convinced that she will suffer.

It simply is not possible for a girl such as she, a simple backwater laundry maid, to receive visitations, either from God or from the devil!

[The scribe smashes his hand on the table, shaking great globs of ink onto his page, and smashing his wooden pen. It takes some moments for him to find another stylus amongst the mess of his writing desk.]

Even so, her grip of superstitious beliefs is curious. It is not the simple superstition of country folk, the *pagani*, as my tutor would call them. She has a means to reason out more than the simple, dogged beliefs that so many of these people have. It is most unsettling. And yet how often have I been taught that the symptoms of madness often begin with claims of visitations, and calculated arguments that in their madness they have power enough to sway reasonable minds. Look to the case of the Maid of Orleans. That witch managed to sway an entire nation. She, too, was of peasant stock. How is it possible that this little *nobody* has been exposed to a mystery that so many of us clergy have no evidence of? And yet, all of my training in logic, all

of my careful scrutiny of natural law, all of science, shows me that visitations and visions simply do not occur within the architecture of God's design. Although that is an opinion that I had better leave unvoiced. As a priest, as an Officer of God, I do not doubt His existence, His Hand in the creation of this world. But I cannot believe in a laundry-maid's exhortations that she has been visited by the Holy Mother *and* the Devil! These things simply *do not* occur in this world.

I am resigned. I will hear her story, but I *will not* be led into believing anything that she might state. I know that women have their wiles, and I *will not* be swayed by her mad speech. I must write down what she says as part of my duty in this case, and since it is a duty that I do not take up gladly, then all the more worthwhile will my efforts be. It is my duty not to see a soul burn at the stake upon false allegations. I must, then discover if what she says is truth. It is my duty to write down the maid's statement of the case, but I need not allow myself become involved. It is my duty to remain impartial, to act as a confessor, and to use my impartial mind to analyse the events with the most rigorous logical scrutiny.

[The scribe lays down his pen, covers his eyes with his hands and leans upon the table. As he rubs the flesh around his eyes, his skin is covered with black smudges from the ink on his fingers. His shoulders slump forward, and one of the candles that has been sputtering for a while now snuffs out. His hands jerk away from his eyes and he notices that there is only one candle flame left burning, the one that sits on his desk, at the front edge, throwing light onto his paper. He snatches up his pen and writes.]

I wish to the Holy Mother that I did not have to be involved with this case!¹

[The candle flame burns itself out.]

*

He watches her.

He watches her scratch the stylus over the paper, ink dropping from the upper part of the nib, spreading out through the fibrous paper over the top of the word or two she has written. It is a tremulous hand, and he can see that the letters are unsure, the spelling foreign. 'I am sure that I shall understand her writing even less than I understand her speech,' he thinks to himself, and settles back into his chair, crossing his legs, to await a something that he is not sure of. The candlelight flickers in a way that makes him want to check the wick, busy himself looking for another candle before the flame is eaten by the night. He has made that mistake too often himself, caught in the grip of the words, the study of the words, of the Spirit. And then he himself has had to go bumping and banging in the dark for another light, afraid that his unwieldy body will strike the table and knock the ink over the fruits of his labour.

Her head is bent over the parchment. Her hair does not reflect the light. 'She is ill,' he thinks with a clarity of remembrance of something that he learned on his father's farm as a small child. *A badly treated animal will always get sick and die*, his father told him once, when a neighbour's dog was found dead in their fields one harvest.

¹ The Holy Mother replies; 'Be careful what you wish for, you might receive it.'

His attention wanders from her lank hair to the hands that shake in the grip of the stylus. Her fingers are thin, the joints swollen as a hag's. 'She is eaten by fear', he thinks.

Another drop of ink falls from the pen to the page, washing out another word. In the dying light he notices that another drop falls onto the page, a drop which reflects the light of the candle, and the spirit of the girl. A clear drop, which mingles with the ink-drop and makes the blot on the page spread dilute the word she has just written even further.

And he thinks back to the first time he met her. And he remembers the fear of his own heart.

'It is difficult, isn't it?' he whispers.

Her head jerks up. 'What?' she hisses. Her hand brushes across her eyes.

'The writing.'

'I don't understand.' She clears her throat, wiping her hand over her mouth.

'The writing - getting the thoughts and the feelings out from your head and your heart onto the bald page.'

She is silent.

'You can do it, eventually,' he folds his hands in his lap, fingers clasped together. 'It takes patience and practice. Am I correct in thinking that this is something you might not be practiced in?'

'What do you expect from a laundry maid? I know nothing but linen and sheets and hot-irons and lye. And the confusion of catechisms from one end to another.'

'I do not follow you,' he leans forward. 'What are you saying?'

‘Oh, here we go again! Don’t you men ever listen? Small wonder you can’t get your own thoughts onto paper when you have no means to know another’s.’

He takes a deep breath and reminds himself of his training.

*

The Private Diary of a GhostWriter

15th July 1642

Thanks be to God for daylight! How we do become befuddled by the dark, and the night’s treacherous hidden madness. Reading again my last notations convinces me that God belongs to the Sun and the daylight, and strength, reason and intellect. No more will I lose myself in night’s confusions. No more will I allow myself to be drawn into the deceitful tangle of story and false words! I must find the truth to this case, and I must do so with a rational timetable, a regime of research, analysis and dictation. Let me list the tasks ahead of me;

First, to gather up these papers and refine them into their natural and logical order: reliable and holy sources first, then students; these I shall divide into two categories, students of some experience over those first levellers and those of little experience; what is left is of doubtful use however I shall refine the testimonies thus; those of unknown profession, then Slovak servants, then youth, and then female accounts. Perhaps this order will assist the work of refinement, of finding what the truth is. Once these accounts are refined into this natural order, I shall re-read them beginning with the least likely to be of use. Thus I eliminate the least necessary details, culminating with the most necessary and precise facts.

[The scribe sets about sorting out the multitude of papers that are before him. He remains bent over his desk through morning, noon and mid-afternoon. When dusk begins to descend, the papers are heaped up in small piles that are neatly set on the desk, on his two chairs, and even on the floor. Some piles are very thick, some are thin, consisting of only two or three pages. The scribe stands in a corner of the room, his hands behind his back, surveying the neat ordered heaps he has arranged around him.]

*

‘I am educated, you know, Father.’

The voice breaks his reverie. Somewhere between watching her write and hearing her voice this moment, the man has fallen into a motionless state. He stirs, shaking himself a little. He blinks, pulling his attention back from wherever it has wandered. ‘I beg your pardon?’. He attempts a smile.

‘*I said,*’ she grits her teeth, ‘I am educated. I mean I do know how to write, I just don’t have much use for it. I have to work.’ The pen lies between her fingers, which are blotched black along the circle made by her thumb and forefinger.

‘Don’t you ever write to your father and mother?’ he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, covering himself from the cold that is seeping through his body.

‘Mother can’t read, and Father only has a little by way of reading and writing. I write to them, but it is simple.’ She pushes a strand of draggled hair away from her temple.

‘And why is it, then, that you can write a little?’

‘I was sent to school for a while. The parish priest taught me my letters until he said I would not need to know anymore. Magdi learned more from him than I. That’s why she was sent away from home first.’ She looks into his eyes.

He blushes, then looks down. Outside, the closed window, the clatter of hooves over the cobblestones bursts in. There is some shouting as well, but neither man nor woman move to the sound.

‘How does one get the words from the head onto the paper?’ she asks, gripping the stylus.

‘What?’ His eyes widen.

‘I said, how can you write down the words that you hear in your head? Or don’t you know what I mean? Have they taught you all the words in the world that they are always at your command? How do you attach a lot of black marks to something that you see, or hear, or touch, or feel?’ Her breath comes hard, as if she has been running.

‘I am sure that I do not understand you.’ He stands up and stretches, turning to the piles of paper that lie on his writing desk.

‘I am sure you do. If I am accused of witchcraft - then isn’t your writing witchcraft as well? Capturing something and manipulating it until it no longer possesses any thing of its natural state?’

He turns, his hand upraised, his shoulders tensed, his palm flat. ‘Don’t blaspheme!’ he roars.

But his hand stops short of the side of her head. His flat palm turns into a fist with a pointing finger. ‘Don’t blaspheme,’ he growls.

Her head has not moved. She sits, her head bowed, but her eyes are narrowed and follow his every move as he paces away from her. The room is not large, so he must turn around and face her again. In the dark, he feels crowded, cramped, breathless. He fights with his temptation to run into the street, away from this creature who sits and watches. *'Witch'*, he thinks to himself. *'Witch'*, he thinks again, looking at her.

But it is a name that does not suit her.

'I beg your pardon?' She murmurs.

'No, nothing.' he clears his throat. He returns to the piles of paper on his desk and begins reading them, lifting one sheet when he is finished with it and placing it face down on the other side of the desk.

She continues watching him. Her hands are pressed between her knees, her skirt gathered tight around her ankles as the damp begins to rise from the floor's stone flags. She shivers slightly but he does not notice. He moves a candle closer towards his neat paper tower of the testimonies and she no longer sits within the circle of light.

'Which one of these is true?' he barks at her, not looking up.

'All of them, sir . . . and then none of them, if you wish,' comes her voice out of the dark.

His heart begins to race. *'Witch witch witch'* are the words that are circling around in his head. He can't seem to ignore them, or silence them. He suppresses his trembling.

'I do not know what you mean, Miss Regina.' He fights to keep his hauteur under command. 'There can only ever be one truth, one fact. Surely you must have been taught that.'

‘I never got that far,’ she replies. Out in the darkness, she raises an eyebrow, but he cannot see it. ‘And anyway, I don’t think that’s true.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ he splutters. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Don’t act as if you don’t know what I mean.’ Her voice seems to hiss at him from her corner.

‘Heresy.’ He sits back in his chair. ‘We know that your aunt wants to lure you away from the Faith and in with the Lutherans. That’s where you receive such ideas.’

‘Father.’ Her voice is low. ‘Lutherans don’t believe in ghosts. Why would I want to make up such a tale if it wasn’t true? Have you not seen the marks on my face and my arms? Have you not read the stories of all the others who have seen him? Some say that he came as a kind old man. Some say that he came only as a light, or a flame, or whatever. Why can you not understand that I was the only one to see him as he appeared to me? Others felt him, isn’t that fact enough?’

‘Yes, but *why* didn’t he appear to at least two of you in the same form at the same time? How can I believe such a nonsense of different testimonies? Where is the truth in all this?’

She gives a loud and bitter sob. ‘*And what is the truth, Father?*’

‘You know what is the Truth. You are a good girl, they tell me.’

‘And yet, even you cannot talk to me without wondering if I am what they say I am. You accuse me before we even begin.’

‘Oh, come now, Miss Regina, I would not even be here with you if I believed that you were a witch.’

‘Still, I know that you are questioning me. Whatever I tell you, you will ask yourself, what is this witch saying? How do I know that she is not sending her demons after me? How can I trust what she speaks of?’

He shuffles the papers once again. ‘I ask you now, Miss Regina. How can I trust what you tell me when there are so many different voices speaking of the same thing? And, if I may ask a question, how do you come to know so much about witches anyway? Why should I believe that you are *not* what they accuse you of?’

The woman’s laugh is ugly. It turns to a cry, and then another, and then she leans her head over on her knees and the tears course from her cheeks into the wool of her skirt. ‘I doubt you would understand,’ she cries. ‘There was an old woman in our village.’

The man stands up. He places the papers down in a pile, and shuffles towards her. He stands a few feet away from her, half in the candle’s light, and stretches out his hand. He pats her once or twice on her shoulder.

She shrugs his hand off her and cries more. ‘Please don’t.’ She sniffles.

He shrugs, moves back to his chair, thinks, ‘*She knows too much for her age. She thinks too much. How is this possible?*’ He sits back down, scratches his tonsure, notices that it is almost time to have it shaven again. He stretches out his fingers, they crack a little. He drums his fingers on the desk before him. ‘Hmmm’ he says.

And again, ‘HMMMM.’

She is quiet, still bent over.

‘Are you tired, Miss Regina?’ his voice is steady.

She sits up, but does not speak.

‘You know we have to do this work,’ he continues. ‘Will you return tomorrow?’

The woman looks at him. ‘I suppose so,’ she says. She stands, takes her cloak from where she left it by the door.

‘Shall I see you safely home?’ he asks.

But she is already out of the room, and he can hear her footsteps running away from him. He stands, and presses the door shut behind her.

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The Private Diary of a GhostWriter

16th July 1642

In God’s almighty Will, not a page of this makes sense! Not one single account is clear! It is all the same nonsense and babble that comes from each mouth who has told his tale and to the under-educated apprentice scribes who have blotched their parchments from beginning to end. It is obviously the work of the devil, sent to try me and confuse me, to spread his evil confusion into the world to set me off my path of righteousness and justice. Even the most trustworthy of accounts have been perverted by the depravity of the apprentice scribes, who obviously had not the ears to listen to the truth amongst the words and set this truth onto the pages! It makes me suspicious of the younger ones, who most obviously do not appreciate their training, or at the very least seem to be rude enough to divert the professors from construing to them the correct methods of the work.

The very devil in conspiring against me in this work. Though I have seen this before. It is not the first time that I, scribe of the Holy Roman Church, have seen such utter evil and perversion. Satan really does walk amongst us, Heaven preserve us! It is so very like the case that I was privileged to witness when I myself was such a young scribe (although as God is my witness I was *always* more careful - more ambitious - and more accurate than these nasty young things coming through now). To remember it, though, makes me shudder. I am certain that if I dwell on it for too long it will distract me from this work and give me nightmares, as is certainly the devil's evil intent!

But it might afford me a clue into this tangled mess of horrible blabbering that lies before me now, in my own room.

[The scribe rests for a moment while he thinks. He squints, shakes his head and shudders, then nods his head once or twice, his shoulders set before he picks up his pen again.]

I will ask the woman, that laundry-maid to whom the alleged spirit appeared, to give me her version of the events. I will not let the truth pass me by in this devilish confusion of tongues. That will be my penance.

[Much later on, he lights another taper near to his work, picks up his stylus, dips it in the ink, and then sits down to write. The stylus remains poised above the paper, dripping ink just below the curlicue of his earlier writings. It takes a good ten minutes before he can lower his hand and begin]

It is difficult for me to not write. It seems unnatural. This seems to be one of those moments when the Divine spark of inspiration has left me and I have nothing within me to overcome this lapse into nothingness. If I have ever come close to the outmoded notions of the essentially perverse nature of woman, now is the time. Where is my reason? Where is the logical stability of my knowledge and learning? I am astounded, and cannot think clearly to write down what it is that I have to report. My interview with the laundry-girl has left me without words. Even this illogical garble that I am writing now can express nothing of what I am feeling, impressions and moods that I must quiet within, since these emotions seem to be affecting the clear narrative of what has just passed.

If ever I had thought that asking the laundry-maid for her account of the happenings would clarify the issue, I have now cause to think again.

[The scribe shudders.]

This is proving to be a treacherous task, one that I now wish I had no part in at all. What is to become of this work? I, who have never shied away from the challenge of illuminating the truth of God's Divine Work, I who have even *stolen* in the name of the Work, I am now shrinking away from the task and allowing myself to be confused by a *woman*.

How can this be? Have I bitten into this worm-ridden apple held out to me by this decrepit Eve, who despite her youth, is not beautiful, nor is she innocent. She has not said as much, but I felt that she herself *knows* of an intelligence which is beyond

human understanding. Is this the devil's knowledge or not? I can feel fear creeping around the edge of the candle's light. I do not like this sensation. I must resist whatever it is that is coming to me now. I must call on my faith, and the aid of the Holy Mother to prevent whatever this woman represents from entering my heart and corrupting me.²

[The stylus flies from the scribe's hand. He stares after it, although he cannot see it as it has landed outside the protective circle of his fat tallow candle's light. He looks around himself. As before, he notices the flickering shadows at the corners of the ceiling, the shadows that dance and shimmer across his floor. He takes a deep breath. And another.]

Have I lost my own strength of reason?

*

When the man wakes the next morning, he sees that the wind has blown in and strewn his neat parchment piles about the room. Then he shivers, and notices that he is cold. He sit up on his pallet, gathers the covers around his shoulders, and surveys the room. Whites patches cover the floor, some flapping a little with the cold wind. The man, still waking, is overwhelmed by the feeling that should he stand up and begin gathering the paper scraps, he will find them running away from him, inviting him to a chase.

² The Holy Mother answers; 'Open your heart, even if you find it difficult.'

He shakes this thought from his mind as the biting of the cold awakens him a little more. Now he must crawl out from beneath the still-warm bed covers and attend to his day. His hand stretches up and over his head and pats the tonsured crown; a few days' growth, but he cannot register yet that this, too, needs attention. The man rubs his palm to and fro, to and fro over the soft re-growth. He hunches forward, still staring at the chaotic white patterns before him.

He sees nothing. He stares and stares and cannot find anything in the arrangement of the papers that allows him an entry to the vague black scratchings that spread across the hairy, flat wisps. A bell rings at a close distance, the noise penetrates the room and dances between the walls. The sound seems to hit the man; he shudders, then shrugs the warm covers from his shoulders. He stands, re-arranges the sleep-rumpled robes about his body and crosses himself. It is time now for morning devotions, and although he composes his face as he walks across the room, his feet kick through the layers of paper that cover his floor.

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The Private Diary of a GhostWriter

17th July 1642

I am feeling strange. This simply cannot be. I am gripped in a tight grasp and I do not know whose hand is clasping me. I am as a candle, melted by the heat of a full church, unable to sustain the flame of logical reason. I do not know, truly, what I write. It is as if body and soul and mind have all separated and I am thrown into divided vortexes of disorder.

The woman speaks and I am rendered useless, irrational and impotent. Is it as the good men have said, When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil? Is the treacherous perfidy of this woman creeping into me, soiling me, a mushroom sporing and I am the earth into which her evil seeds fall? In truth, I do not know what I write. It all seems incorrect when I read over what I have written. Or rather, I write it and it seems an accurate depiction of my feelings, yet on paper it is meaningless, even to myself, the author of these strange words. They do not come from myself; they are deranged and empty, empty of any meaning that is related to my feeling. And these words have absolutely no relation to my thinking, a function that seems to have left me at the present moment.

The woman speaks and her words have fallen into my ears and knocked out the careful structures of logic and learning that I have taken so much pain to order myself with. All that discipline, all the lonely hours of study and rationality and *order*. All those quiet hours, myself and the texts, all gone, all erased, with the voice of a woman. I should never have let her persuade me to put down my pen. Have I become Adam to this vile Eve? And where is the serpent in all this? Holy God in Heaven, where is the serpent? Who may I call upon for protection?

[the scribe throws his stylus down, its trajectory leaves a long smear of ink over the already-spattered, damp, scorched, torn parchment that contains his personal writings. He pushes his chair back and falls onto his knees on the hard floor beneath. He grips at his head with his hands, but the rest of his body is still, paralyzed, unable to move. He takes comfort in the darkness behind his eyelids.]

[After a long, long moment, he shivers, and lets out the groan of an animal trapped by a limb in a steel spring-trap. He stands, his shoulders slumped forward, and resumes his place behind his desk.]

It is passed. What fearful moments, what hellish ordeal. It felt as though my heart would break in two, the ache in my chest gripping me surely as the devil grips his victims before throwing them into the fire to burn. I am calmed by the grace of God. It seems that there is a path that I must tread, but that path stretches not only before me, but behind me as well, and I must return back down this path before I may continue forward. This is difficult for me. I do not believe that the path already trod is accessible once it has moved beneath the foot and has already been walked. It defies all logic to return to places already moved through. Those lessons learned already do not need to be relearned, for what is the point of learning that which one already knows? I know what I know. Why must I travel back again? What is this travail that I must revisit? How can I gain knowledge from that which I have already understood and, in all likelihood, forgotten? I cannot see why this cup must be handed to me. It is against all that I have ever conceived and known. It is against all my education, all my commitment to my vocation, all of my ambition and all of my future growth.

But I must take an example from one far, far greater than myself, and must submit to where this road takes me. I must accept this regression. I must, I fear, lower my guard and expose myself to humiliation, even if it never goes further than these pages on which I write. Indeed, I can never show these pages to anyone else. Otherwise I ruin myself.

It rankles, this humiliation and exposure. It is distasteful, and it puts me in mind of Martin Luther's repulsive inspirations from the privy. Oh Holy Mother, let this cup pass by me!³ Wash me clean right here and now so that I must not fall from my holy office and open myself to any evil influences!

[Again, the scribe stands. He places his pen down without spilling any ink and goes to kneel before a small wooden pieta that stands in a quiet corner of the room. He bends, his hands on the cold ground, and brings his forehead to the ground, hard, three times. Then he lies on his stomach, arms outstretched, legs clenched straight together, and stays there for a long, long while. From time to time one of his limbs jerk, or his eyelids flutter, like a dog dreaming.]

*

On his return, he finds the woman standing and waiting by the entrance. For a moment he feels his calm leave him, and he hopes that this does not show on his face.

‘Miss Regina!’ he stops beside her. ‘I did not expect to see you so early.’

She peers up at him from beneath the shawl that covers her head and shoulders. ‘I thought you were eager to get on with the work.’ She looks into his eyes.

‘Yes, well.’ He does not meet her gaze. ‘Are you not expected to be at your duties?’

‘My duties are light. I am not expected to work whilst you have a need of me. My sister is assisting the household.’

³ The Holy Mother states; ‘My child, I will never give to you more than is necessary, for I give life,

‘We had better go in, then. I cannot waste your time so.’

They enter the room, and the woman gasps. *Did you do this?* she chokes, bringing her hand before her mouth. He frowns. He hates the sound of snickering.

‘Unfortunately, Miss Regina, I left the window open and it was the wind that made such a devil’s work of my notes.’ She blushes.

‘Don’t use those words.’ She clutches the shawl closer to her body.

‘Which words?’

‘Devil’s work.’

Her eyes, he notices, are puffed and red-rimmed. They appear very dry, and the skin underneath is grey. Her hands, he observes, shake a little, although she keeps them clasped tightly to still them. Her knuckles are white beneath the flaking, rough skin.

‘Won’t you sit, please?’ He indicates the stool in the corner. She sits and unwraps the shawl from her head, keeping it close to her shoulders. She is silent.

But he can hear her breathing, hard, ragged, inflamed. He looks back down to the floor, hands on hips, at the mess beneath him. The woman, too, keeps her eyes lowered, although where the direction of her gaze lands is not to be seen.

The man clears his throat. He turns, surveying yet again the room and its disheveled papers. Three times he turns, slowly, before he bends down and begins gathering up the scraps of paper. The woman sits and keeps her eyes down.

When he is finished, he taps the thick stack of paper on his table, lengthways, widthways, it makes a hollow sound that echoes around the room. He slaps the pile on the table and pats at the edges to straighten up any stray sheets.

and a rebirth from all travail which seems like death!’

‘It is still a chaos,’ he says, clasping his hands behind his back. ‘Shall we begin?’

The woman does not answer. She is slouched forward, and her breathing is long, although still ragged.

‘I beg your pardon, Miss Regina, but shall we begin?’ His voice comes out a little too loud, a little too forcefully.

The woman sighs; her whole body shudders. ‘Devil’s work, that’s what we are doing. The devil’s work.’ A tear flows from one of her eyes onto her cheek, and then into the corner of her mouth.

He rubs his hands together and sits down at the writing table. ‘I am sure it is nothing of the sort, Miss Regina. We have a lot of work to do today and it is for no other purpose but God’s work, to benefit us all.’ He pulls the chair into the table, scraping the legs as he reaches for his stylus and the ink bottle. ‘Now, let us begin again. Let us start from the beginning and see if we cannot finish this today. Please, begin.’ He holds the pen above the clean parchment.

A tiny drop of ink falls from the point of the wooden stylus onto the paper and spreads in a small splotch. *‘Please just let her say something so that I don’t waste yet another piece of this parchment!’* he thinks.

‘Where do you want me to start? I can’t even remember if there was a beginning or an end.’ Her voice is low.

‘I was happy at home. We lived in our village, and I had my mother and my sister, my father was a wood cutter and nothing much happened to us.’

The man rushes to write this down, word by word. In the silence that follows the woman’s short speech, he rereads what he has just written. It makes little sense to

him. But he dips his stylus into the ink and as he poises the dark, wet nib above the parchment he utters, 'Go on.'

The woman inspects her hands, fingers spread out before her. 'Father, I just don't know what to tell you.'

There is a small tightness in his chest as he places the stylus into the ink bottle very, very carefully. 'What do you tell your confessor? Why not talk to me as you would talk to him? We are, after all, just the two of us, and you should feel free to relate your problems to me.'

'But you judge me, and what happened to me is not a sin. I did not ask for it. Nor can I ask for forgiveness, because this thing was sent to me. Why don't you understand this?'

'Miss Regina, I am not here to understand or absolve you. I have been asked to unravel the truth of your story.' He sits back in his chair and folds his arms. 'Why not start at the beginning, and tell me a little of your family, a little of your life?'

'My life is very, very ordinary.' She lifts her head, her chin raises, and she looks into his eyes.

'And yet, something has been revealed to you that is extraordinary.' He picks up the pen again and shakes some excess ink from it. 'Please begin, Miss Regina.'

She sighs. And closes her eyes.

'Our village is very small. Just a few forester's families, a few farmers, and yet we are six miles from Halstadt. Which, they tell me, is famous although I do not know what for.'

'And has your family always lived in this village?'

‘No. My parents came to the village when I was very small. I can remember the journey to the village. We came with all our belongings packed on a cart, it was a sunny day. I was sitting squashed in a corner of the cart with my doll, and I looked down and saw all the people on the road. I felt so high up, I almost thought I was a bird. I wanted to reach up and touch the tree branches, but mother wouldn’t allow it.’

The man clears his throat.

She opens one eye and looks at him. He stares down at the paper before him.

‘Magdalena, my sister, was born not too long after we came to the village. I remember thinking that she was a doll until Oma Rosa put her in my arms and she started bawling. After that I was so happy that I had a sister because I was lonely. Oma Rosa told me to treasure my sister, as she would become a great comfort to me when I was grown, and lived far away.’

The man raises an eyebrow.

‘Don’t.’ The woman is staring at him again. ‘You don’t know the truth of these things. You haven’t any idea what we must live through. I prowled into the room when my mother was birthing my sister, and I was frightened.’

‘Miss Regina,’ he says in a low voice. ‘I am not judging you. I am just taking down your story. Please continue.’

‘We lived. In summer we picked wildflowers and herbs and Oma Rosa taught us how to -’ she pauses. She glances at the man. She draws her skirt underneath her knees. He pauses, but does not look up from his paper.

‘She taught us how to understand the flowers and herbs, how to use them for healing, how to understand each other.’

‘So you would say you had a good relationship with this old woman? What about your parents?’ He is busy scribbling.

‘My mother, my sister and I all loved Oma Rosa. My father did not like her. He would listen to talk at the inn, and think it true.’

‘And what sort of talk was that?’

‘The nonsense of men. The speculation over an old, unmarried woman who liked animals and who refused too much company.’

‘Oh.’ The man still does not look up. ‘And what else did she teach you?’

‘Now you are judging me again.’ The woman sits up straight, her head held high again. She does not continue.

The man reads over what he has written as the woman watches his face. He scratches out a word or two, and writes a few more lines. She is sitting opposite him, on the other side of the desk, and cannot read the words from the distance between them.

‘Perhaps we should move on. You said yesterday that you had been educated?’

‘Yes. I was taught my letters by the village priest, who also taught me a little of the catechism, some prayers, and a little of the Bible. He said that what I knew was more than enough for a young lady who was destined to work in a big house in Halstadt. Magdi persuaded him to teach her for longer than I. She was better at learning than I am, and people mostly like her more than me. She is a born silver-tongue, and can talk her way into and out of anything. She even persuaded father to let her come to Pressburg before me, though I am her elder, and should be looking out after her.’

The woman smiles, a secret, warm smile not meant for this room and this time. The man permits himself a small chuckle after her example, but the glow that lights her pale face for a moment retracts, and her eyes darken as she hears his sound. His eyes return to the paper, where he continues with his scratched scribbling. She remains silent, and after a while he taps the end of his stylus against his fingernails.

‘I didn’t want to come to Pressburg.’ Her voice is almost low again, almost a growl. He strains forward to hear her. ‘I didn’t even want to go to Halstadt.’

‘What did you want to do then? You must earn your keep somehow, until you are married.’ The thought surprises him. ‘Did you not long to see more of the world than your village? I remember I did.’

She frowns at him.

‘If you must know, I wanted to stay in the village and live with Oma Rosa and learn her craft-’ she pauses, catching her breath, ‘- learn her trade and then continue doing the work after she had become too old to go on. There. I have never told that to anyone. Not even mother. Not even Magdi. I didn’t want to need to work. Oma Rosa taught us that there is plenty in the forests and the fields to help us survive if only we knew how to find it.’

The man puts his pen down. ‘Lazy girl.’ He says. ‘You can’t rely on such peasant ways, an educated and healthy young lady. It is your duty to seek out active work and relieve the burden one such as that makes of himself.’

‘Oma Rosa was never a burden to us! She earned her keep properly by healing people who gave her food in gratitude! That’s fair trade, wouldn’t you say? You can’t eat a gold coin, but you can eat like a baron if you know where to find the food! You

don't know what you are talking about, calling a poor old soul like that a burden! What right have you got, you who -'

'Enough!' he stands up, slamming his hands on the table. 'I should have expected better than that from a girl of your position and standing. Keep a civil tongue in your head, otherwise I cannot promise that the Calvinists will not get the wrong idea of your case!'

She jumps to her feet. 'You dare, you dare!' She chokes.

It is mid-morning, and the light shines in through the window, pale, bright, cold. The young man and the woman stand facing each other and the light dares to move across the window a little, letting the spiked shadows of the furniture creep across the floor stones in silent agitation. He sees an angry, angry woman whose face is bruised, whose arms are grazed and burned, whose skin is dry and beginning to line, whose hair is lank, brittle and unkempt, whose thin body lets her clothes hang, unshapely and unseemly despite their serviceable, elegant quality, whose clenched hands cannot subdue a constant twitch that sometimes seems to shudder through her entire body. He is revulsed.

She sees an angry young man whose face is starting to puff up, whose skin is red with dignified rage, whose robes do not drape too loosely over his frame, whose fingers are stained with black ink, and whose hair and beard are in need of a trim. The sight does not touch her.

The man and the woman stare at each other until a small noise insinuates its way through the thick, cold silence between them. Her eyes hold his gaze, her eyes dry, and even underneath the anger that passes between them he can see the tiny red lines that cross the yellow-tinged eye-balls. It is only the slight sting and water of his

own eyes that prevents his glare from slipping to the dull purple shadows that rest above her cheekbones. Through the solid heat of his rage a thought threads its way; 'I wonder how she can *stare* so!', and it is at this point that the salty prickle of tears blurs his vision and compels him to drop his gaze and notice that his ink bottle has toppled over and a pool of the weak black ink is dripping onto the floor.

Another thought enters his head before he has time to censor it; 'I wish she would hurry and clean that mess up.'

In the moment that he has turned his attention elsewhere, she has returned to her stool, and sits, elbow to knee, head cradled in hands, and resumes peering at him.

'You do not think much of me, do you? I am not surprised.'

He does not answer as he searches the room for a rag to sop up the ink that is spreading over the stone floor. The drips land with a soft sound that is a little like the sound of a cat licking up cream. As he sets the bottle upright and then begins dragging a rag through the ink, spreading it further and further across the floor, she says, 'I cannot tell you my story if you threaten me.'

He is kneeling, and does not look up at her. The ink rolls out in wavelets from his black-wet hand, clutching the rag.

She taps her foot. 'You are only making a mess'.

He does not stop dragging the rag through the ink.

'Why do you not just let the cloth lie over the ink to soak it up?'

He throws the rag down. Kneeling back on his haunches he still does not look at her.

She continues, her small voice loud in his silence against her. 'Do you truly want to listen to my story? For if not, I cannot tell you what you want to hear. That would be lying.'

He says nothing, he stares at the rag that is drinking up the spilled ink, its fibres bloated and black. Finally, he shudders, and the words leave his body as a sigh; 'What are you?' he mutters, raising his head and looking at her again.

She chuckles, a hollow, dead kind of sound. 'What am I? I am a laundry-maid, whose clumsiness cannot let her rise in the household.'

'Then why do you not behave as a laundry-maid? How can I make sense of your tale if you resist me like this?'

'How can I tell you what happened to me if you threaten me and try to make me say what you want to hear for your own sake? Would you not write down on your fine paper that I have black marks on my face and burns on my arms? Do you want to hear more lies? Are you going to make a lie of me?'

He hangs his head. He leans forward and drags a corner of the wet rag over a little. A smudge of sooty black smears a trail across the floor.

Her eyes are bright, although he does not see them. He considers the dragging lines of black that weave over the lines in the stone floor. Her cheeks are growing red, and she is beginning to tremble. The bruises on her face turn a duller, deeper purple.

'Are you going to condemn me to the flames?' she says.

His neck clicks as he pulls his head up to meet her gaze. But she is looking at the wall behind him, her eyes shining, but not wet.

'No,' he murmurs. 'No.' He stands, moves to the side of the room where a heavy black chest stands. He opens it and fumbles through it until he pulls another

bottle of ink from its depths. He sets this on his table and opens it, picking up his stylus and dipping it in.

But the young woman cannot speak. She cannot look at him, and for more than a few minutes she remains staring into the distance. Although he coughs politely once or twice, shuffles his papers and spreads them out on his table, she does not speak or look at him, and so he softly says, 'You may go now if you like, Miss Regina. We can continue again tomorrow.'

She leaves without a sound, and when she is gone from the room, and the door pressed shut, he slumps forward over his work and remains like that until the room begins to darken.

*

The next afternoon, the piles of paper are sitting square and neat on the desk. A blank new sheet of parchment waits next to a full bottle of ink and a clean stylus, and the balls of crumpled paper have been removed from the corners of the room. The sounds of the street outside are filtering in through the open window, through which a weak shaft of sunlight throws its rays, and through which the woman is standing at, looking out. Her hands grip the twisting iron bars that slice the space lengthways. The man, groomed and clean, sits watching her. 'Where did we leave off yesterday?' he asks, leaning back into his chair.

She watches the passers by through the window. 'If I can recall, you asked me if I did not long to see more of the world.'

'And did you not?'

‘No. I was telling you that deep within my heart I longed to stay in the village and become the apprentice to the healing-woman, and you reprimanded me for my laziness.’

‘Miss Regina, I do apologize. I just do not understand such lack of ambition, such loathe to better oneself.’

‘And why do you call it a lack? Do you not know the work of a canny-healer? It is not an easy life. When you were a child, did not your village have a healing woman of its own?’

The man looks at his hands. ‘I cannot ever remember growing up in a village of any sort. My memory reaches only as far back as my first year in the monastery school.’ He taps his fingers on the wooden desk.

‘Then that is a pity, for there is something that even your high learning does not teach you.’

He blushes, but does not say anything.

There is another silence between the woman and the man, and she continues her meditation on the scene outside the window.

‘Oma Rosa used to tell us that when she was young, there was a priest who would sometimes take part in the festivals of the village. She told us that he was an understanding man.’

He coughs. ‘We were told at the seminary from a very early age that these were pagan festivals, and that we would burn if we were to observe them, least of all to encourage them amongst the country-dwellers.’

She does not answer. She appears fascinated with the life outside the window.

The priest shifts about in his seat. 'Perhaps we should let this topic rest,' he leans forward, trying to close the space between them. 'What caused your parents to decide to move closer to Halstadt when you were so small?'

'Did they not tell you?' She turns to face him. She places her hands behind her back and leans against the wall. He searches for her face, but it is darkened by the sunlight that shines through the window, behind her, around her. 'My parents were making a penance.'

'Won't you sit down?' he asks, squinting.

'Thank you, no.' she replies. 'I am comfortable where I am.'

'Then please continue.' He reaches for his stylus, although he is not aware that he is doing so.

'When he was young, my father became a Lutheran. He ran away from his family, married my mother, who was also a follower of Luther, and I was born. My mother suffered with my birth, and for a long time could find no pleasure in life, in her family, her daily tasks. She was, my father told me, listless and guilty, and would not take up the duties of wife and mother. He told me that it took a revelation for her to resume her life's task, and it was not until she heard the word of God and took up the Catholic faith that she returned to her happy and dutiful life. My father had been praying for a miracle, and so he too became a Catholic. Together they decided that her lapse was sent as a punishment, and as penance they would return to my father's family near Halstadt and gladly suffer whatever consequences came their way. But when we returned, we found that my grandparents were dead. And so it was proof to my mother and father that their return to the village was preordained for their salvation.'

The man clears his throat. 'But that is a heretical doctrine . . .'

She shakes her head. 'They were so newly converted, their ideas were still mixed. That's what Oma Rosa told me when I was confused by the priest. He had told me one day that my parents were going to burn forever because of their heathen past, when I had asked him a question about what they had told me. Oma Rosa found me crying on my way home.'

'And what did she say to you?'

'She told me that whenever I felt confused, I should come to her. When Magdi was born, my parents had it in their heads that she was saved, being born to Catholic parents, while I was not, as I was born when they were Lutheran. It took many months for me to stop crying at the thought of that, I was so frightened by the idea.'

The man does not speak. He is working the stylus up and down, up and down in his fingers, tracing letters and words in the air.

'Why are you not writing this on your paper?' the woman asks, turning around again to press her face against the bars at the window.

Again, the man does not answer. He dips the stylus in the ink bottle, but then lays the pen down. A small drop of ink settles on his table.

'Perhaps I should continue, she says, her back still turned away from him. I remember it so well. It was about this time - I call it the crying time, because all I can remember was that I cried so much - that Oma Rosa began stopping me more and more often as I would take food to my father at his work. Sometimes she would give me a bunch of wildflowers, or forest moss and ask me to smell them, or touch them, or tell her something about them. I liked her. I did not cry when I was with her, and so I would try to find things from my mother's kitchen to give to her. Nice things, that

nobody seemed to want. I think mother knew, but when father found out he was very angry with me.'

'So,' the man mutters, and reaches for his pen. 'When your father found you stealing from your mother's kitchen, he was angry with you.' He scratches a few words into the paper. Then he looks up at the woman standing at his window. She is gripping the window bars, her head is slumped forward, and he can see that the pale, pasty flesh between the collar of her dress and the line of her lank hair is stippled with red spots. He cannot discern if they are pimples or burn marks or scratches. There is something in the droop of her head and back that causes him to say, 'Is that correct, Miss Regina?'

As he waits for her answer, he notices that she is butting her forehead against the stone window-sill. 'Come away from the window, Miss Regina,' he says. 'Come and sit down and let us resume this task.'

He scratches a line over his parchment and writes next to it. He mutters as he writes, 'She gave food to an old village woman.'

She shakes her head, but moves from the window to the stool. When she sits, her back is hunched over, and there is a sooty smudge on her forehead. She sighs, and he can hear a rattle in her chest.

'Magdi was just a tiny baby then, and I can remember how she yelled when father was chastising me. Mother thought that she was frightened, but I could see in her fat little face that she was angry. The next day when I told Oma Rosa what had happened, she agreed with me, and said that I would learn to be good at reading souls and hearts. Soon after that I was allowed to go to the village church with my father. I was so excited - I wanted to get close to the statue of the Holy Mother. I had seen her

being taken out in processions, but I was always too little to get near Her, and my mother would always clutch my hand so tightly. It seemed to me that the statue of the Holy Mother was like my mother, and then when I met Oma Rosa more often, the statue was like her too. To be able to go to the church, and to be near the Holy Mother was my highest ambition when I was smaller. I wanted Her to read my soul and my heart and to speak to me.'

The man put his elbows on the table and leans his head on his hands. 'And did She?'

She looks at him, her eyes narrow, then looks down again. Her shoulders sink even lower. 'If she did,' she whispers, 'I could not hear it for all the tales of hell and wilderness and fire and sulphur and devils. It was about then that I started dropping everything that I held in my hands.'

Her voice is louder now. 'My mother was at her wit's end, not only trying to train me in my household duties, but also trying to keep it from my father. He could not understand why we were never with dishes and cups and why our clean clothes always had specks of dirt in them.'

Although her eyes are lowered, she smiles, but the smile fades away soon. 'My father began coming home from his wood cutting later and later, and there where whispers amongst my mother's friends that he was spending more time at the tavern to avoid his useless family of women.'

She does not see the smirk that the man tries to hide as he shuffles the papers on the desk and dips his stylus into the ink well again. He taps the excess ink on the side of the bottle a little too loudly.

‘Magdi was wise.’ She hunches over, cradling her knees with her arms. ‘She took no notice of this talk, little baby that she was, and would poke her tongue out at anyone who would speak sternly to our mother. This would make me laugh, and then again poor mother would have to reprimand me. Even Oma Rosa noticed Magdi’s behaviour, and would say that the little one was an old soul, but not necessarily a wise one.’

The man looks up sharply. ‘What exactly did she mean by that?’ His pen pauses between his fingers, which are ink stained.

The woman shudders again, and covers her face with her hands for a moment before she says ‘Nothing. Nothing. It is just the idle gossip of country women and it means nothing, neither on earth or in heaven. Please overlook my words. It is the meaningless prattle of a laundry-maid.’ She pulls herself up, straightens her shawl and tries to smile at the face of the man behind the table. But he is bent over his work, writing.

His arm is moving fast across the page and after a few minutes of furious scribbling, he reaches for the ink pot across the desk. His sleeve grazes the paper. The words he has just written meld together in a long, black streak of ink, and are no longer legible. The woman’s eyes open wide, her face contorted into a look of horror. He does not notice.

After his face has flushed and then become pale again, and his breathing has returned to a steady pace, and his mouth has stopped gaping, he permits himself what passes as a polite laugh. ‘It seems, Miss Regina, that you are not the only one who the devil provokes to be awkward.’ As he bends over the page, attempting to read the black streak, he still does not notice the woman’s face growing whiter.

He sprinkles a little salt over the inky smear, and presses a greying piece of scrap parchment over the top. Then he takes a little knife and begins to scrape away at the damp streak. The paper tears, and even though the man scours the patch so carefully, he cannot save the parchment for more use.

‘Do you really think that that was the devil’s work?’ The woman’s voice is low.

‘Hmm? What?’ he stops scraping and looks up at her for a moment before he begins his delicate task again.

‘Do you really think the devil did that?’

‘Oh? No, Miss Regina. It is just a figure of speech. This,’ he points at the paper with his tiny blade, ‘was just an accident. It happens to scribes all the time. It is just a hazard of the work.’

‘But what if the devil made you smear your writing so that whatever it was that you wrote against me could not be seen? What if you made me repeat it, and I told it to you in a different way, and whatever you wrote was changed? What if the devil is trying to protect me? What if the devil does not want me to be purified by fire?’

‘Miss Regina, no-one wants you to burn at the stake. Your theology is somewhat rustic.’ He puts the blade down, wiping off the pills of inked paper. He dusts his hands, leaving even more ink lines over his skin. ‘Why not see it this way? What if it was an angel of God who erased whatever was written against you?’

‘Father . . .’ her voice is even lower than before. ‘Have you ever been in the presence of . . .’ she stops.

‘The presence of what? The presence of who?’

The woman's face contorts. Her skin becomes red as she holds her breath, and her body begins to shake. The man pushes himself out of his chair, and tries to go toward the woman, whose spasms have her choking for air, sobbing in great dry gasps. But he stumbles over his table yet once again, scattering his neat paper piles. He moves to the side, and then he moves back, clenching his fists. He does not know what to do.

And a great wail arises from the woman's mouth and answers the question which he had thought meant nothing.

'I don't know!'

And the man can do nothing but stare and stare at her. '*Is she a witch or isn't she?*' is what runs through his mind.

The room in which the woman and the man are grows cold. The wail hangs in the air, an aftershock, an echo that still rings somewhere in the ears, even if it no longer vibrates between the stone walls. The man still stares at the woman, and it begins to appear to him that she herself is vibrating. It is not so much that he thinks he sees her shivering, or shaking, or trembling, but his eyes, which he hopes are deceiving him, see that a golden, or silver, light is shimmering from her. Or does he see it shimmer through her?

*Holy Mary, Mother of God,*⁴ he manages to order the words in his mind.

He rubs his eyes. 'I must be tired,' he mutters. 'I must need to take myself beyond the confines of these walls and meditate awhile amongst God's greenery.'

He takes his fingers away from his eyes and focusses again on the place where the woman is sitting.

⁴ The Holy Mother replies; 'Yes, my little son. I am here.'

She sits, half hidden by the long shadow that is creeping across the floor, the dark bars' silhouette slicing through the pale sunlight.

'I am tired,' he states, and the words toll through the room.

She raises her eyebrow and looks up at him.

'My head aches, and I need to breath a little air.'

She does not respond, only continues looking at him.

'I will take a break from this work. I have been bent over my papers too long, listening to you. I am going for a walk. Will you come with me?'

'Is it seemly?' she asks, her lip curling a little. 'Do you not wish to be alone?'

'I do not mind if you join me or not. But I feel confined within these four walls. It is as if our conversation cannot escape into truth. Outside this room we might talk a little more.'

'But it is becoming dark. I do not like the night.' She pulls her shawl about her shoulders.

'As you wish.' He begins rummaging on his table, putting the papers into a square pile, wiping the stylus, clacking the inkwell's lid up and down, up and down. He stretches his hands above his head. 'Well, Miss Regina, I am going. I bid you a good afternoon.'

Having tidied his desk, and taking a woollen cloak from its hook on the wall, the man opens the door, walks out of the room, and steps through the hallway into the street. He looks down at the cobblestones and frowns. The runnel that marks the centre of the street is almost dry, there are only a few fluid patches that are the remains of the previous night's wastes drying underfoot. He begins to walk through the street as though his legs are heavy. Indeed, he can feel how stiff his limbs are, how

unused to even this exercise, and as he walks the tensions seems to unknot itself from his muscles. Above him, he notices that a few windows have been flung open, a flutter of lace curtain catches the afternoon sun in a white flash. He notices a door frame; it is ornate, but the wood is dry and rotten. He cannot decide whether this adds to a certain unsophisticated charm, or whether it is careless to leave this beautiful carving to deteriorate so. As he plods up the street he decides that, ultimately, it does not matter. He gathers his cloak about him as a small, chill wind chases between the buildings' canyon. It is not yet spring, and in the morning the night's effluent which is poured out of the windows will crackle with a little frost. A little dog darts out from behind another doorway, catches the hem of his cloak and pulls him off-balance for a moment. Briskly he raises his hand, but as he watches the little dog he begins to see a smile gather around the teeth which hold his cloak, so he laughs. The dog wags its whip-tail, and a voice floats out from the courtyard beyond the doorway, 'Bessi, leave the good Father alone! Come here at once, you naughty dog!' The dog retreats, and the man laughs a little more, his mood changing with the disembodied description of him from beyond the doorway.

He moves up the street slowly, noticing small things, a flower pot, the flash of a glass pane as a window opens, a flutter of laughter from behind a wall, and then he is aware of fast footsteps behind him. He does not turn to see them, but rather continues, one foot in front of the other, listening as the steps slow down a little behind him as they approach. They are not light steps, they shuffle and scrape, but the man is glad to hear them. He has expected them. He hears a hoarse voice behind him.

'Father,'

He does not turn around.

‘Father!’

He stops, clasps his hands behind his back, and turns around, arranging a pleasant smile on his face. She stands square in the street facing him, breathing hard and ragged, her shawl slipping from her head revealing straggled, greasy hair, her face a motley of red and purple patches. She does not smile. She crosses her hands across her chest and clenches her fists.

‘Father, if you don’t mind,’ she pants, ‘I will walk with you.’

He does not say anything, he turns and continues walking up the street, the woman shuffling alongside him. To him it sounds as if she walks in uncomfortable shoes.

‘I am glad to get away from that room,’ she says. Her voice is a little gentled.

‘Dark rooms and enclosed walls frighten me.’

He does not reply, just continues walking at a slow and steady pace. His cloak billows out behind him with the breeze, and she is careful to avoid coming into contact with the dark wool.

Eventually the cobblestoned paths peter out, and more and more tufts of grass spring out amongst the loose stone flags, and soon the path is nothing more than a wide and well-worn groove climbing up the side of a hill between budding trees. Every so often the woman holds her arm out and touches the bark of a tree, or lags behind the man and stoops down to pluck a piece of grass, or a vine. Before them is the Castle, which stands alone on a green hillock, and the Cathedral just below it which crowns the town that spreads between the hill and the river. In the late afternoon sunlight the roofs of the town gleam hot and red, and a bright autumn haze fills the air that hovers over the buildings.

They stop beneath a linden tree that is just beginning to cover itself in green leaves that let the sun through like lime-stained glass. Drops of sunlight flutter through between the leaves and shower the damp, cold ground beneath the tree. The man takes a deep breath of the still-frosty air. The woman reaches up and picks a leaf, spreads it out on her open palms, then folds her hands together, and breathes in the cool green scent of the linden leaf. ‘Holy Mother,’ she whispers, ‘Holy Mother⁵’

As they stand there a bell begins to toll. The deep chimes of St Martin’s Cathedral boom out over the city, and one by one, the chimes of the other churches, cathedrals, chapels, temples join in the slow rush of sound that billows over the Danube and rolls away with the tide. The woman and the man stand beneath the tree and watch the sound flow through the hazy light, down through the walled city and amongst the houses and buildings, allowing themselves to be filled with the gentle resonance that comes from a combination of earth, water, sun, heavy, moist air and finely tuned clanging metal.

A tear gathers at the corner of the woman’s eye, and rolls down her dull and bruised cheek. ‘This is heaven,’ she whispers. ‘This is where the Holy Mother is.’

‘Before me Pressburg, at my right, Budapest, at my left . . . Vienna.’ The man mutters. His skin is shining. ‘The world is stretching out before me.’

Neither one listens to the other. A small wind arises, shakes the linden leaves together, and the sound of the clapping leaves carries the harmony of Pressburg’s bells away over the sunflower, corn, and vine fields that stretch out away from the town.

⁵ The Holy Mother answers; ‘Whenever you have need of anything, my children, you shall assemble in some open place and adore the spirit of Me. I do not demand aught of sacrifice, for behold, I am the mother of all things and My love is poured upon the earth.’

A few moments pass, and the man clears his throat. The noise jars against the murmuring of the leaves and bushes around them. 'Miss Regina,' the voice is a little thick. 'Do you care to talk to me now?'

'Mmmmmmm?' She turns to him, her expression is vague and unfocused.

'Do you wish to tell me anything now?' he repeats, still watching the vista spread before them.

'Oh, oh.' She bends down and touches the earth at her feet. 'What is it you wish me to tell you?'

The man looks shocked. 'Ahem,' he splutters. 'Ahem. I had hoped that you might want to continue with our conversation. I do still hope that you will tell me your story.'

'Ah,' she breathes. 'My story. Which story will this be?' The light that has been bathing her mottled skin dies a little, and her skin dulls to a grey sort of shade.

The man clasps his hands behind his back, and rocks forward and backward on his feet. 'Well, I had hoped you would proceed from where you left off.'

'And that was where?'

'I believe that you were relating to me of your life in the village before you came to Pressburg.'

'Sir,' she murmurs, 'Sir, have you ever been in the presence of . . .' she stops.

'Is this what you were saying before?' he asks. 'Have I ever been in the presence of what?'

She turns to look at him. Her look moves from his eyes, to the top of his head, and down to his feet, and then back to his eyes. Her gaze rests there a moment before she turns away from his look.

‘Sir, have you ever seen the Holy Mother?’

He blinks.

He opens his mouth, but no sounds come out from within.

He clenches and unclenches his fists behind his back until his arms swing around to his front, and then hang there, unable to find an authoritative posture.

She is calm. She stands and views the vista that stretches out from the hill.

‘What,’ he finally spits out, ‘do you mean? Exactly?’

‘Father,’ she replies, ‘You keep thinking things about me. When you write, you put words into my mouth that I do not agree with. And you do not want to listen to what I have to say. So I don’t tell you. Do you, truthfully, want to hear what I have to say?’

‘Well,’ he splutters, ‘Of course I do.’

‘You must be sure, Sir, because you might not understand what I must say. Sometimes I do not understand it myself.’

‘Miss Regina,’ his face is composed now, and he has thrust his hands into his sleeves. ‘If you cannot understand it yourself, how can you expect *me* to understand you?’

She faces him. Her breathing is coming harder now, and even in the dying light he can see that her bruised face is drained of colour. In the silence between them there is the sound of a heart beat, but a fast and frightened heart beat. She has started shaking, despite the sun’s last warm rays.

She croaks, her throat thick; ‘Either you understand what I say or I burn.’

His mouth opens again, and again no sound comes from within him. He watches as her whole body heaves with her breath. Her head is turned towards him,

but her widened eyes do not stare into his own. He scans her face, looking for a clue in her expression, but all he sees is the white flesh, the eyes staring behind him - no, *through* him, the veil of darkness that is dropping over her as the light dims moment by moment. A small flash of anger runs through his veins, hot against the cooling, still air.

'Are you challenging me?' he asks, the fire tingling through his arms and legs.

She does not answer. Slow, slow, a wounded thing, she turns and begins to walk away from him. Step by step, a hobble, caught in her flapping long skirts, she moves down the path, down from the hill, back into the city. He watches her go, and by the time she is out of his sight, it is dark.

There are a few lights in the city that he can see, night torches, fires, but on the hill there is light. It is a dark moon, and his cold walk back into the city is filled with stumbling, tree-caught cloth and curses. One of them is that he will never see her again.

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The Private Diary of a Ghostwriter

17th July 1642

Damnably witch! Who is *she*, nothing but a mere laundry knavvy, to refuse to speak to me! *I*, who am attempting to lift her out of the charges of the heretic Evangelists, *I*, who am trying to save her from the flames of earth and hell!!! The prophets were correct in their condemnation of the female sex, so arrogant, and so full of pride. And completely without reason of mind. Or principle. Or respect. Certainly

not his wretched wench! Refusing to speak to me! *Me!* I, who am her superior, I, whose knowledge and education far exceeds anything that such a one could ever dream of with her limited mental capacities! She is mad. She is possessed. I will tell the bishop that she is insane, that she has no reason and that she should better be recommended to a nunnery, or some such place, to protect her soul from further such outrages. It is completely untenable. In the name of all that is sacred, a mere woman, no, a mere *chit* refusing to speak with me, to confess her sins to me! By all that's holy, if all witches are so sinfully proud, it is little wonder that so many of them have been purged from this existence! They bring it all upon themselves! Father God punishes those that stand in defiance of Him! And justly so!

How may one fix a clear and just punishment when there is no solid evidence, no *truthful facts* upon which to draw a conclusion? Perhaps this is my only guide in this confusion of a case I am obliged to work with. The Lutheran Evangelists wish to try her as a witch, for dabbling with unclean spirits in the devil's work and for forsaking the Lord in the name of the Virgin Mother. The Holy Church and my superiors wish me to prove that this *nothing* as the knavvy calls it, was a tormented soul in purgatory who asked her to redeem his soul from sin by fulfilling a promise he had made in this life to the Holy Virgin Mother of God. I myself cannot understand why, if indeed this was a soul from purgatory, it appeared to such a simpleton, such a stupid and low female, and not to someone of perhaps a higher birth, or someone whose understanding of spiritual matters was more educated and dedicated? Why did this *nothing* appear to her? Why not, for instance, the Graf von Pálffy, or even myself? Where is the reasoning here? Wherein lies the knowledge of such things in such a *female* who is most obviously not capable of reason and logic? The good Graf,

and even myself, know far more of spirit and flesh, of heaven and earth, than such a one. How is this possible?

With the calming eye of logic and reason; she must have been dabbling in the devil's work to call forth such an unclean spirit. That is a simple enough equation. A country maid who confesses she has knowledge of cunning arts has skill enough to work this. And it is proven since time can remember that cunning folk are all liars when questioned about the black arts they practice. *All* cunning folk are pagans and work with the devil. It is proven.

Considering all these facts against her, perhaps it might be seemly to consider the lapse in purging our lands of these perilous influences that has been with us so very lately? As far as I have the right to remember, the last such a great cleansing occurred in my youth, perhaps fifteen, nay twenty years back. I have often wondered why the Church has been sleeping, why we have not kept up our cleansing operations. I hazard to put forth a hypothesis. During this lapsed time there has been a resurgence of such heathenism; particularly since the expulsion of the Evangelists from Bohemia. That they were allowed asylum here only proves that there is a curse upon us, a curse of tolerance for sin and heresy. When one allows tolerance for one such evil, it only loosens the gates for other evil to enter. Therefore this land is riddled with heresy, witchcraft and sin. It is self-evident that it is now time for another such purge. Perhaps, with God's will, I am the one to begin this righteous cleansing.

The Private Diary of a GhostWriter

18th July 1642

I must recollect myself before the woman comes today for our seemingly mutual purgatory. I have had time to reflect through the night, and have cast my mind towards this case in a different light. It is the decree of our Holy Mother Church here to foster thoughts of humanity and charity. We acknowledge in most accusations of witchcraft that many forces operate within these cases. We realize that sometimes coveting property, or other licentious impulses can blind the accuser from the truth, that being that as our great modern thinkers have shown us that the world is the design of God, and the chaos of alleged witchcraft cannot exist in such a rational structure. We actively seek to discourage the trials of so-called 'witches', thus this tedious process of investigation.

Yet, we also believe that there is evil abroad which can work through any soul. The devil can work through any of us if we give him an opening to our souls. This, I believe, is occurring in this very case that I am investigating.

I believe that no woman can act the way this maid does unless out of some perverse inspiration. Women by nature are perverse unless in the care of a rational influence, such as husband. I believe that this woman is somehow possessed by a devil although I cannot tally this with my knowledge of order and the science by which I have learned the natural world.

Therefore; I conclude that there are two levels of being, the dividing line being that of gender. Men are rational and seek to find the logical order of the world. Women are contrary to this, and obviously seek to distort the order of nature. This leads to the natural conclusion that women are lesser beings than men, full of impenetrable impulses that disarray their minds. Therefore, they are more prone to the devil's workings since they cannot control the dangerous openness of their souls.

Therefore, to protect the world abroad from such influences it is better to destroy it. Therefore, in some considered cases, the destruction of such a one is justified. As I understand it, this region has not had such a purge for almost twenty years. Surely such evil must have been accumulating somewhere in the interim time?

*

He is surprised to see her the next morning, just after Mass. It is not a pleasant surprise. His manner is abrupt; it has been a shock to return from the peace of the church and the sung Mass to find her waiting, cloak-wrapped against the chilly morning, at the doorstep of the presbytery. He notices that her skin is shining with the cold, and this has the effect of fading the bruises on her face. The mottled skin is turning grey-yellow-green. There is only a small patch of angry plum-blue left.

He clears his throat, but does not say anything. He opens the door and walks in, holding the door open behind himself for her. He marches down the passage and does not look to see if she is following him. He opens the door to his work-room and walks through. The door slams shut behind him, he turns and stares at it, and watches as the door is pushed open and the woman enters his room. She faces him, and stretches her lips back a little, a movement of the mouth which he echoes. He cannot meet her eyes now but knows that her gaze is focussed on his.

‘My sister sent me back here, she says. She says that I must tell you what happened to me. Otherwise, she says, she can see me falling into disaster. She doesn’t want that to happen. I didn’t want to come back’. She rocks forward onto her toes and clicks her heels down. His gaze follows the sound, and he notices her skirts swirling

around her feet. He thinks he can see a pair of old country boots hidden amongst the folds of cloth, but his mind tells him that these matters are of no importance to him at all. He bites back his retort, 'I didn't want you to come back either.'

He says, 'please take a seat,' and points to the small three-legged stool that he has had placed in his room especially for her.

She crosses the room to the stool, seats herself, smoothing the dark wool skirt over her knees and around her.

He seats himself behind his desk, takes a fresh sheet of parchment from a pile to his left, smooths it over the wood before him, picks up his stylus and dips it into the inkpot.

Again, she stretches her lips at him. Again, he ignores it, his hand poised above his paper. An ink drop falls in the silence between them and spreads itself through the paper's thick fibres.

'It is difficult for me to speak when you are waiting like a hawk to pin my words down onto your paper,' she says. Her voice is steady, but high-pitched.

He places the stylus down in front of him, an exaggerated gesture. 'What do you suggest then?' He leans his elbows on the desk and brings his fingertips together.

'What if we simply talk? We could imagine it to be like a confession.'

He raises his eyebrow. 'Do you have anything to confess?'

'No, Father,' she says, 'I do not. But it might help the task at hand if you would only listen to me without the need to verify everything with your paper. You might understand me more if you would hear me rather than note me down and learn of my tale after you have captured it with your clever pen.'

‘And then how am I to remember what you say? How am I to know you are telling me the truth?’

‘Because, Father, I am. I have no reason to lie. But you must listen to what I say and try to understand it.’

‘Why can you not rely on me to fulfill this task adequately? I am, after all, a trained scribe, a man of letters, and have some scientific knowledge that may help you in presenting your . . . experiences in a way that will sway those against you.’

‘But first you must understand the truth before you begin to bend it. Do you not agree?’

He is horrified. ‘I have *never*, never, *bent* the truth to present a certain argument! I rely on fact, *fact!* I tell you, to show truth for what it is.’ He begins to slam his hands down on his desk, but does not finish the action. His palms come down with a quiet thump, instead.

‘Father,’ her tone is quiet. ‘I did not accuse you of anything.’

‘Hhhmmphh,’ he snorts. ‘Hhhhhmmmmmmph.’

Again the silence hangs between them. It is impenetrable, an invisible wall as thick as the walls that surround the city of Pressburg. The light that filters through this wall is pale, slightly grey, a turning-autumn light, and it is filling with the icy chill that is the harbinger of winter. Neither one sees the other shiver as the grey light passes between them.

She sneezes. Her shawl falls from her head and her hair springs away from its tight coif. The dampness in the room weighs the fine brown strands with cold heavy humidity, and they draggle over her face. She drags her hand across her forehead,

pressing the hair back, but it does not stick despite the dampness, and falls back over her skin. 'I wish I was not here,' she whispers.

'Eh?' he is glad that she has broken the silence. 'What was that?'

'I said, I wish that I was not here.' She presses her fingertips to her eyes.

'Where is it that you wish to be?'

'I wish I was in the forest outside my mother's house. Where the air is clean, and the light is either bright or dark, not grey.'

The man puts his pen down and sighs. He folds his hands together in his laps and cracks his knuckles. 'Go on,' he says. 'Why do you like the forest so much?'

'I am alone in the forest, I am protected by the life there.'

'What do you mean? Does this have anything to do with your alleged apparition?'

'It is not alleged. It was real. But it never appeared to me out of doors. I became frightened to be inside. But that is where my work is.'

'And did you spend much time out of doors back at home in your village?'

'Yes, oh yes.'

'And what were you doing? Why did you have no other occupation?'

'I was learning from Oma Rosa. How to do cunning work.'

'And so that I may understand - what is cunning work?'

'A little midwifery. The village was too far to call an apothecary in every time someone was giving birth. A little herbal healing. The villagers still have faith in the essences of the forest. A little animal husbandry, a little . . . let us say . . . understanding of the folk.'

'What does that mean?'

‘Knowledge of the mind, the heart, the spirit.’

‘This sounds like blasphemy.’

There is a silence. The woman looks down, a flare of red on her dull cheek. He can see that she is struggling with herself, her mouth moves around some words that she is holding back.

‘Please, sir, let us suspend your judgement. Remember, it is not the priest who judges in the confessional, but that Higher power. Please, just hear me.’

‘Very well.’

‘Very well? Is that all you can say?’ Her eyes are bright, and for the first time he can see that there is a tremendous force working within her.

‘What is it you want me to say, then?’

‘Tell me that you will simply listen to me. Promise me that you will not write anything, or make a decision about me until you have heard all I say. Promise not to judge me with all the weight of your learning yet.’

‘Young woman, that is a large thing to ask of me. Of anyone.’

‘Otherwise we will not finish this task, since I will not talk to you unless you do this small thing.’

‘Now you are attempting to bind me to a promise that I feel I should not be called on to make.’

‘Do you want me to burn?’ She fixes her gaze on his face. Her face is blank except for the flush of which remains spread over her skin. He looks down at his hands, glances at her, then looks to the right, then to the left, spreading his fingers out in front of him then folding them back together and cracking his knuckles yet again.

‘It is not such a simple matter.’

‘Yes, Father, it is.’ Her voice is quiet and low now. ‘Do you want me to burn?’

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat. He sense the hairs on the back of his neck stand, and a chill runs through his spine. *‘Is this a bewitchment?’* he thinks, before his mind starts racing with other, darker thoughts, a dark chant; *‘Witch witch witch witch’*.

‘Holy Mother help me’,⁶ he mutters, passing his hand over his eyes, rubbing his temple. He notices that she is still watching him, her body straight, her hands folded in her lap, her gaze very, very cold. ‘We are no nearer to the completion of this task than we were days ago. We are only wasting time here. Such a delay augers ill for both of us. Let us make a compromise. I will listen and you will speak. I will not interrupt you and you will relate to me the story of the apparition only. I will reserve my judgment and you will tell your truth. Do you agree to this?’

‘Holy Mother help us both, we have no choice. I agree.’

‘Then let us begin, once more from the beginning.’

The woman and the man stare at each other.

The woman takes a deep breath. She places her hands flat on the rounds of her knees and leans forward slightly. She closes her eyes for a moment continues breathing. It is a small sound, but the man finds it irritating. He drums his fingers on the desk, but then becomes irritated by that sound as well. The woman opens her mouth and begins to speak.

‘I awoke.

‘I was in my mother’s house.

‘I awoke.

⁶ The Holy Mother replies; ‘I can only help you when you learn to help yourself.’

‘My mother’s house, where I had been born, where I knew every night-sound, every creak of every floor board. Every -’

‘Stop, STOP!’ the man snaps. The woman’s eye open wide.

‘What, sir, is it now?’

‘I agreed to listen to your tale, not this nonsense again! Can you not speak in a clearer manner?’

She sighs. ‘Very well then. The first time the thing appeared to me was in my mother’s house. Is that clear enough now?’

He clears this throat. ‘Good. Very good. Proceed.’

‘I remember it was winter and I was cold enough, but when it appeared I felt ill.’

‘What did *it* look like?’

‘Like nothing.’

‘Miss Regina, I warned you!’

She sighs again. ‘It looked like darkness within darkness . . . nothing. But I could feel it, and then when I was so frightened I thought that I might die, I saw an old man sitting on the edge of my bed. He sat there for a very long time, leered at me, and then disappeared. I woke the house up with my screams. I was terrified.’ She looks down.

‘Continue.’ The man looks at his pen and paper, sitting on the desk before him. His hand, he notices, sits flat on the table just below the stylus.

‘My father was embarrassed. He said that I woke the neighbours with my screaming. He started arguing with my mother the next day, and then the next day and every day until I left.’

‘Why did they argue?’

‘He wanted me to stop working with the cunning ways. He said no daughter of his was going the way of Oma Rosa.’

‘And what did he mean by that?’

‘He thought that I would turn mad. He thought that I was becoming a little mad already, by even agreeing to undertake the work. He did not think it work at all. He would let no-one mention it outside of our household. He could not see the good of it.’

‘He had no use for the cunning woman?’

‘None, not even when he saw the village goats die one by one, or when another village wife would die in childbed.’

The man scratches his head. The woman remains silent. An image comes into the man’s mind of his childhood, an image buried so deep he wonders for a moment if it really is his. He remembers an old, old woman visiting his family’s barns during the spring, placing bunches and bunches of herbs in a corner near the byres. He thinks for a moment, trying to conjure up the memory of what happened to those herbs, but as far as he can think, the animals would most likely have eaten them along with the grass and straw. Did they eat grass or straw? He cannot remember. He can only think back to what healthy creatures they were. His mind grasps for a memory somewhere beyond this image, something that he can feel but cannot see. It itches him.

‘I am sure that those people have their uses.’

‘Pardon?’ The woman stares at him.

‘Unless they begin to meddle with unholy things, I am sure cunning people have their place in the order of things.’

The woman chokes back a laugh. 'I am sure I agree with you.' She covers her face with her hands.

The man scratches his head again. Then he shakes his head, as though the memory was lingering there, the last traces of a heady wine, and he wanted it gone.

'Please continue.'

'I could not understand my father. We are a God-fearing household, we all are devoted to the Holy Mother. Although Father still berated us for this. He somehow thought that we were wrong to pray to the Holy Mother.'

'Ah, I understand. He was still confused by his flight to the Lutherans.'

'I am not sure. Mother went with them as well, and she was as devoted as my sister and I. No, I believe that father did not really like the presence of so many women at home. He felt it that he had no son. That is one reason why he disliked Oma Rosa. She once predicted that he would never have a son, but that his daughter would live on well beyond her years.'

'What's this? Prediction? That *is* a sin!' He is shocked.

'But you just said that cunning folk have their place. Why is it that when it comes from the mouth of a man he is a prophet, and when it is from a woman it is sin?'

He smiles down at her. She glares back up at him from her low stool. He clasps his hands behind his back and begins pacing the floor, but slowly.

'It is of an entirely different order,' he murmurs. 'Man is made in the image of God, and woman comes from man. Therefore woman is of man and therefore lesser than he is. Man is woman's superior, in strength, intellect and reason. We must submit to this Divine order.' He speaks to himself as he paces, but the woman feels that he

mouthed the words like an automaton. She taps her foot on the floor as he repeats this phrase over and over to himself.

‘Shall we continue, do you want to hear what I must tell you?’ Her voice is thin, acid. It creeps through his muttering and pierces the drone of his low speech. He stops pacing, crosses himself, and takes his seat behind the desk. ‘Yes.’ He says. ‘I am merely a little tired. I needed to clear my head. Continue.’

She looks at him again, her eyebrow raised.

‘I will try to go a little faster.’ She says. Her mouth is tight. ‘Father wished that I should stop learning cunning work and find suitable work in Halstadt. I could only offer my services as a laundry-maid, since I have no other skills that could be of use in town. Whilst we were waiting to hear about a position for me, my sister Magdalena sent word that Tante had a position for me. Or rather, word was sent in Magdi’s name that Tante had a position for me. Father seemed very happy when we heard.’

‘Yes, yes.’ The man mutters. She looks at him again. She ceases her tale. Her eyes narrow as she sits and looks at him. The air grows thick and silent while they both sit and stare. She at him and he at his hands.

Inside his head there is a slight buzzing, a very faint hum that he can barely make out underneath the rhythmic beat of the blood in his veins. He begins to feel faint. He thinks to himself *‘I am in a grip, I am being gripped,’* but can proceed no further than that.

She sits and stares and stares at him. She is not aware of anything else.

The silence grows very uncomfortable.

He clears his throat but is unaware that he has done so.

She sighs, a great expulsion of air and then shakes her head, her eyes closed. 'I cannot see it either,' she murmurs.

'Hmm? What was that you said?' he turns to her and she can read the blank absence that composes his face.

'It is of no importance. I believe I will leave you now. I fear that you do not listen well to me. I should go out of the city today were I you. Go and take a ramble amongst the grass and the leaves and listen to what they tell you. You will not hear me today.'

He watches her as she stands, takes her leave and exits this small, dark room in which the book-dust settles over everything.

*

When she does not return the next morning, he is relieved, although somewhat surprised. Compelled to church by the bells that ring through the city, he resists their reverberating clamour and without notifying anyone of his departure, finds himself leaving the city's fortified walls and climbing the soft hills that rise above the city of Pressburg.

He climbs back down into the city and arrives between the falling of dusk and the lighting of the watch-torches, no-one sees him slip in through the city's ramparts. It is perhaps just as well, for there is something in the cut of his shoulders and the set of his face that might cause suspicion amongst the more fervent of his colleagues.

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The Private Diary of a GhostWriter19th July 1642

It is not conscionable, but I dream. I am not fond of dreams, for they are filled with nonsense, superstition and an excess of emotion that, in all truth, is not relevant or needed to conscious living. I have heard it said that dreams are either from God or from the devil, but I believe neither; dreams are nothing but the vapours of the sleeping mind, exhaling the noxious fumes we inhale during our waking ours and thus ridding our vulnerable bodies of these fetid streams. Dreams are meaningless, unnecessary, and therefore should not torment the rational man.

But yet, I dream.

And although I am mortified to write of these hallucinations of the weak mind, even in this, the most private of my writings, I find I must do so. For I dream of my childhood. That time of greatest ignorance.

That wretched girl has begin thus. Something in her conversation has brought this defect to me, she has infected me with the irrationality of dreaming, and the foolish innocence of youth. It is her babbling that has touched me, like the ravings of a lunatic, or a witch about to be submitted to questioning. Why have I not protected myself against this?

Dear God, why have I not asked Your protection in this?

Is this that damnable pride?

[The scribe puts his pen down and faces the barred window. From high above, the morning sunlight slants over the buildings surrounding his, through the bars, flooding a square of the floor with strong light. Moment by moment - although the scribe is counting this time by heartbeat and breath - the light crosses his shoulder, his face, his other shoulder until it is on the other side of his body. Although his eyes are closed, he can feel the light penetrate his eyelids, and tears form and then trail down his cheeks.]

Pride or no, I must address this problem of my dreams. Although I must dismiss their content, indeed, I hardly remember their composition or narrative, I cannot ignore the fact that *I do dream*. But perhaps this is not the issue that bears any weight at this time. Perhaps I must find out why the girl has set me dreaming, or rather, what part of her gibberish has forced this upon me.

[The scribe throws down his pen, yet more ink splotches are thrown on his page, and stares at what he has written.]

Why in heaven's name am I so bewitched with the idea that the girl's nonsense has caused this? She is nothing but a laundry-maid, and above all, a woman suspected of the devil's work! If she has affected me in anyway, then it is to tempt me to sin, to *dream*, to question my own rational mind! Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned! I have doubted my own faith that I have been made in Your image! I must not be tempted by the poisonous fruits that intoxicate the mind and cause laxity in logic, and the seduction of the superstitious, irrational workings of the female character.

Remember the wise instruction; Therefore a wicked woman is by her nature quicker to waver in her faith, and consequently quicker to abjure the faith, which is the root of witchcraft. The good Fathers Krämer and Sprenger certainly knew from whence these evils derive.

Perhaps it is better to drive this demonic influence away from me, purify myself from this infernal authority. I will pray - indeed, I pray as I write! - for the resumption of my clarity, my logical strength, to pursue this tainted path with impunity and force a confession from this woman in terms that are clear and impervious to argument. That should end the matter, and my work will be at an end. Only then will I hand my transcript over to the proper authorities to dispose of as they see fit.

I must not dwell in this depth any longer. I fear that it will permanently bend me away from the path of righteousness, and corrupt my soul. I will strive, I will bow down and make a Holy vow before the Lord, that I shall distance myself from these emotions that stir me to such sin. I will be as a rod of iron, my face a mask of indifferent compassion, I will press on with this task, but I *will not* allow myself to be stripped back so.

[The scribe takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. A calm passes through him, and he sits up straighter in his chair, but it is the short motion of one who sits and writes for years on end. The pain across his shoulders bows him down again. A cloud passes over his face, and he shakes his head.]

Resolve must be practiced. I, the best of students, should know that the aim of the study is not in the speed with which one comes to the final answer to the question. The aim of study is the long and winding path through the many avenues of search. The aim of study is to sift through the many false pathways that spring so temptingly up and tantalize the mind which - after all it must be remembered - is the tool of the soul, the tool of God rather than the ruler itself. The mind provokes mankind to illusion, and no matter how fine a mind a man has, that is not the sum of him in the eyes of God. The acknowledge the intellect as above all things is a sin of pride. Pride of humanity, the wretched pride of humanism which has corrupted and tainted so many fine thinkers who have separated themselves from the Divine, and our own intellectual discourses, in their arrogance. The mind, therefore by logical extension, can be seen as a tool of Satan, the intellect a poison fruit disguised in the shape of a luscious red apple to slake the thirst of the dry man.

[The scribe reads over what he has written. His eyebrows raise.]

Perhaps not *all* intellect is such a poison apple. Perhaps in our study we must learn to divine the difference between false learning, which leads to pride, humanism and sin, and true learning, which leads us closer to the Divine Truth. What, for instance, did Adam learn in the Garden? We will never know what passed between Adam and God in the Garden, but we do know that Adam learned that he must not eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Thus, he learned a Truth that would hold him danger of separation from the Divine. In this lesson we may see that to preserve ourselves from ultimate horror, it is better to bow to the authority of the Divine Will.

It follows, therefore, that to give attention to anything, anything that strikes us away from the course of the Divine is utterly evil; thus it is better to ignore with the mask of compassion that which comes from temptation - the temptation of nature, which is symbolized by the snake, and the temptation of woman, which needs no symbol whatsoever to cast abroad its inherent evil.

[The scribe taps his stylus on his teeth, frowning.]

What else may we learn from this course of study, from this path to Divinity? For it seems somehow incomplete from the rigours of intellectual method. Yes, there are some pathways of the mind which lead us to evil, but does that of necessity lead us to accept only one path which we may not debate? Of course, there are multitudes of instances of intellect perverted, but even within the sanctity of our own skilled theologians' minds there are diverse arguments. This is without doubt the first lesson any student must encounter, that although there is One Truth, there is more than one way to reach that Divine One. Excluding, of course, the false discourses that are so prevalent amongst the dissenters. Therefore I feel obliged to pursue another path to this lesson, to prove that study is not a speedy thing, that answers must be thoroughly searched before they are discarded in favour of the better answer.

Therefore I may argue - should I want to - that God in His wisdom is above all things, and that Adam was fated, predestined as it were, to accept the invitation to eat the apple. This occurred so that humankind might come to know sin in order to be saved. Therefore, by this logic, Eve and the serpent were fulfilling Divine Will when they tempted Adam, and that Adam was the means to man's salvation, in a long and

laborious way. And therefore it follows further, that Eve, the symbol of womankind, is little more than an evil tool to cast the darkness that the Divine Light might therefore shine, for did not Krämer and Sprenger posit the theorem; And blessed be the Highest Who has so far preserved the male sex from so great a crime: for since He was willing to be born and to suffer for us, therefore He has granted to men this privilege.

It is a tortuous argument, I believe, but it must be stated, for it seems to me that both arguments train the intellect up towards the Divine Truth, in whatever course each may flow. Perhaps, then, the subject of my dreams may be necessary to discern, so to throw a darkness that the Light of Truth may shine for me and cast warmth over my dis-ease. It may be unavoidable but perhaps the answer to casting out these demons which torment me is to face them with the Fire of God in my hand and hurl them away myself.

Thus armed with faith, Divine Light and knowledge that the paths to Divine Truth are many and varied but always lead to the one goal, I may be able to cleanse myself, purge myself of this demonic taint and rise out, shining like a new-born lamb, to face the task at hand with a clean conscience before God, and resume this work with the compassion of indifference that creates the logical truth which is our best judge.

To work now, and I will remember to leave this page upon the table should I have wits about myself enough to remember my dreams and copy them down.

The Private Diary of a Ghostwriter

no date

[the writing on the page scrawls, one line angling down and one up. The words are spidery, and there are many smudges and blots.]

I dream I am in the forest. No, I dream I am as a beast, a wild boar maybe, on all fours, running, running, running through the undergrowth. I feel the wet earth beneath my feet, I smell the dark green mulch, it must be autumn, I can feel the bark of the trees scrape and my sides. I am running and it is as if I am taken up by a great wind, a great speed and I feel the freedom that a bird must feel when it takes its leave of the earth and flies heavenwards. I feel delivered. I am panting, and I can see the frost that my hot breath makes before me. I come to a cliff's edge, but it is not a cliff, I am on a precipice of a highest mountain, and I look at myself and I am not a beast but a man. But I still smell the odours of the forest, cold and clean. I do not cease running. I run over the turf and hurl myself from the edge of the precipice, but *I do not fall.*

[a smear of ink follows these words]

*

‘Miss Regina,’ he asks, ‘what does it mean to dream?’

She frowns. It makes the fading bruises on her face darken. ‘You are trying to trap me.’

Now he frowns. ‘Why do you distrust me so?’

She throws back her head and lets out one sharp, short gasp of laughter. 'What a question,' she grumbles.

He puts his pen down, leans his elbows on the desk and then his chin onto his hands. He narrows his eyes and looks at her. He says nothing.

She looks at him, expecting, then looks away. She raises her eyes to his again, finds them focussed on hers, and looks down. Moment by moment, she turns her glance on him, finds his stare unwavering, and flickers her look away, a dust mote's dance through the light and shade. Her shoulders begin to droop and she crosses and uncrosses her legs, her arms, shaking out her skirts, tugging at her shawl, unable to free herself from his fixed stare.

'What do you want of me?' she hisses, finally. The sound cuts through the thickness of silence that has built up between them. It cuts for a moment and then the silence closes around the sound wound again.

He lets out a tiny sigh. 'Why do you distrust me so?' he repeats.

She leans forward and drops her face into her hands. 'You have not heard anything that I have been saying to you, have you.'

'What does it mean to dream?'

'I cannot tell you. You would not understand. You think that dreams are of the devil.'

'What makes you say that?'

'I can read it in your heart. Dreams and women. We are both of the devil. Sent to tempt you and make you stray from the path of righteousness. Or whatever it is.'

'Come now, Miss Regina. That is a bitter attitude, and unseemly in one so young.'

‘But nevertheless, true.’

He stretches his clasped hands out, the joints clicking one by one. ‘Well, it is true that this is taught as dogma.’

‘Why do you ask me, anyway? Are you trying to force a confession from me?’

‘Do you have anything to confess?’

She smiles. He thinks he sees a certain bewitching slyness in the shape of her mouth. And then he sees a sadness. It confuses him.

‘I can tell you something of the nature of dreams, though,’ she says. ‘I thought, for a moment, that *it* was a dream.’

‘What do you mean? What is *it*?’

‘The *nothing* that has been preying on me.’

‘Why do you call it nothing?’

‘In truth? The thing had no intent. At least, not in the beginning. That is what frightened me so.’

She looks into his eyes. He finds himself staring back, but does not understand the look that passes between them.

‘I must ask you this question before we go on,’ he breaks the silence. ‘Are you what they say you are?’

‘Hmmm?’ she answers, her gaze indifferent. ‘Who says what about me?’

He clears his throat. ‘The Lutherans in this city say that you are a witch and engage in the devil’s work. That is how you came across the money. Your own aunt and uncle brought you before the magistrate. You yourself tell me that you have been working with a cunning woman in your village, and it is a well-known fact that cunning people are impure and dabble in unclean things. You now tell me that you

have been engaging with a spirit, who frightened you at first. Are you or are you not a witch?’

She smiles, and the bruised skin around her eyes gathers together. ‘You are trying to force a confession from me.’

The man sighs. There is a knot in his belly, and his head begins to ache. He brings his hands on the table and drums his fingers on the dry, splintering wood. ‘There are the facts of your case,’ he finally mutters through clenched teeth. ‘It is self-evident. In every case there are two arguments, for and against. I want you to give me some arguments for your case, not this wretched mixture of superstition, gossip and fantastic nonsense. I have plenty of evidence against you.’

The woman laughs. The unpleasant and bitter sound echoes around the little room. ‘Holy Mother,’ she murmurs between her laughter. ‘Holy Mother. It is not so simple.’

‘You speak like a heretic,’ he looks into her eyes.

‘And you speak like a simpleton,’ she answers, placing her hands between her knees. ‘Why do you reduce everything to black and white only?’

‘It is *logic!*’ he shouts, slapping his hands down on the table.

‘You will not understand me, will you?’

‘It is your decision. It is your choice whether or not you are tried as a heretic and a witch. You must tell me where you want to place your life.’

Her eyes narrow as she looks at him.

The skin all over his body begins to prickle and a cold shudder passes along his spine. *Witch, witch, she is bewitching me*, a voice passes across his inner ear. *Holy Mother of God protect me!*

‘I am not what you say I am,’ she whispers. She stands up and moves before him as he sits hunched at his desk. Her shadow falls over him, and he cannot see her stare to meet it. ‘I will not be threatened,’ she says. Her voice is smooth. ‘I will not continue talking to you. You must tell the Bishop this. I will not be tried and executed by such a one whose heart is so closed, and whose experience of the world is so limited to his own mind. Do what you will. I am finished with you.’ She shakes out her skirts, and marches out of the room.

*

The Private Diary of a Ghostwriter

20th July 1642

Damned woman! How can I cleanse this land when the dirt simply stands up and leaves me instead? Leaves *me*? The situation is wholly untenable. I have been given this task and I cannot complete it due to the lack of willingness on behalf of this witless subject. I have no more to say about the matter. It is beyond my control, and I within my heart, I want nothing further to do with it. The sooner we rid ourselves of the superstitious taint of the common people -which leads to the ridiculous excesses that I am witnessing right here before my eyes - the better a hold we will have on the sinner’s wasteful dallying. But at the present moment I am too exhausted by the girl’s ridiculous posturing to want to bother with this work!

[The scribe throws his pen down, rubs his eyes and groans. His fingers are blackened with ink and it smudges around his eyes, settling in the creases that fan out on his temples.]

How am I to extricate this confabulation from the girl? How am I to take the tale of a miracle from this tangled mess of nonsense that she refuses to tell? What can I do to make this nonsense rational? Holy Mother, how can I do this work?⁷

[The scribe's hand relaxes onto his parchment, and the stylus drops from between his fingers. His head bows down, his shoulders droop. A ray of bright, white light moves across the small space of his the window and begins to creep across the desk at which he sits. His eyes are closed. There are no sounds from the street outside, nor from the nearby cathedral. The scribe watches the blackness that lies between his eyelids and his eyes, and becomes aware of a silence that fills not only the room, but himself as well. He allows himself to enter this silence. When the cathedral bells begin to ring out the hour, he shudders, and opens his eyes. Finding the stylus still between his fingers, he takes it up, dips it into his ink pot, and begins again to write.]

There is nothing else that I can do but to go to the girl and listen to her. I have been led to recall - by the grace of God, otherwise there is no point to my recollection, since I am a consecrated priest - the times in my youth when I would be taken to the cunning woman in my village for healing. In that place everything was filled with clarity, although this is a personal confession between this paper and myself. Under

⁷ The Holy Mother replies; 'Only *see* for yourself, my child.'

no circumstances may I reveal this to the world at large. I believe that this is the clarity that I am seeking, and I feel that I will not find it in this room. Even the damnable heretic texts - which was it? Gospels of Nicodemus? Acts of Pilate? - whose verity I refuse to acknowledge but must use to draw this analogy in true logical fashion - talk of Christ's descent into hell prior to his ascension and resurrection.

Holy Mother protect this paper! Should any other eyes but my own see it, I will be taken for a heretic myself. But I am plunging into the darkness to do God's work. I have been given a task and I see now that I must explore all the darkest corners of this tale to bring to light the miracle that will redeem this strange woman. Should her story prove worthy of her redemption.

To what extent should I believe this woman?

And, as conduit for the Holy Church, to what extent must I become caught up in her story? I feel that I am beginning to walk a dangerous path and I am not sure that what I am about to do - to *listen* to the woman - is in accordance to the creeds of my faith. It seems unseemly, but I am moved by some unnamable part of myself to do this; to look upon the woman with mercy and try my utmost to reveal some of God's plan that lies behind her lunatic ravings. I will go to her. I will listen to what she has to say, and I will not try to capture her words on paper but rather reconstruct later what she says to fit God's plan.

[The scribe puts his stylus down, stretches his arms above his head, and smiles. He is pleased with himself.]

It is several days before the scribe overcomes his rage. During this time he is sullen, and the other men in the Jesuit college avoid him. During the one mass he is called upon to participate in, it is noticed that he serves without the due reverence. He gnashes his teeth during these days, unaware that he does so until his jaws begin to ache, and he breaks a tooth on a heel of hard black bread. During the time he has allotted for his work, he paces his room, swishing the hem of his robe about, stirring up the dust, stirring up a wind that plays havoc with his notes and makes his desk tremble. The ink pot threatens to tumble often.

When he prays, the scene winds on through his mind, over and over, so that after three days it has changed, and the Regina within-his-head has become more bruised, more belligerent, more cunning, and somewhat lewd, in the proper manner of witches.

After that, the scene ceases, and the scribe experiences a great exhaustion, so that for a further several days he can do little else but attend masses and vigils, and lie on his pallet. The papers still lie strewn about his room, and he admits no housemaid in to dust, let alone pick up the scraps of parchment and put them on a pile on his table.

And after he has regained a little of his strength, he sits up one morning and views the brilliant white sunshine that comes in through his window. *Holy Mother of God*, he thinks, *how beautiful*. And he is surprised by his own thought. His next thought is, *I must get on with the work. I must see the girl*.

He rubs his head, and finds that his tonsure has become bristled with growing hair. His fingers work around and around the near-bald spot, sensing the dichotomy of

rough-smooth as he strokes the hair first against its growth and then with it. *I must do it*, he repeats to himself. He stands, attends to his grooming needs, and leaves the seminary.

It is a short journey between the seminary and the palace of Graf Pálffy. The cobblestones buckle, and the road is uneven, causing the priest to trip over his toes several times, but he does not notice. He barely lifts his gaze from a unseen point in front of him, one that keeps eluding him and keeps his vision to the periphery of the twisted hard corners of the stone city. He almost falls down the steps of the cathedral's south square, but doesn't bother to cross himself. He threads his way through the bustle of servants going about their business on the streets, not noticing those that greet him. The light is dull, and grey, but he does not notice this until he enters the dark stone archway that guards the Pálffy palace. He stops, because he can no longer see anything.

The door guard stammers a welcome, but the priest waves his words away.

'Take me to Regina Fischer,' he says.

The guard blinks. 'Eh?' His voice holds a hint of contempt, but the priest does not notice it.

'Very good, very good,' the guard smirks. 'Off we go, then.'

The priest does not think to himself, *This man might have seen something too, this man may give me the proof that I need.*

The guard leads him through a door on the left, a rough-hewn wood door that leads to a small stone antechamber. Through another door a spiral staircase begins, carved around a stone centre that leads down under the earth, but also up - in steps that grow smaller and smaller - to the ceiling. Behind the stair column that leads

nowhere there is a niche, old-fashioned and pointed, that contains a thick wax candle. Unlit, its streams of wax are halted in their flow. The air becomes darker as the guard and the priest descend under the palace. The priest finds himself wishing that his cape would not billow out behind him as he walked. It is too reminiscent of a country healer, one of the strange figures he suddenly remembers from his childhood, who no longer seem to stalk from village to village through the woods. A chill runs up his spine and heats the water in his armpits to flow, but he catches himself in this act and exerts a control over the memories flitting through his mind.

The arches above the heads of the priest and the guard are barely visible. The priest looks up and sees nothing, and thinks wildly that he should be careful in case he walks into a too-low curve of stone. Again, he is reminded of a world, a nether world of his dark fantasies, fueled by long hours kneeling in his cell with the words of a hellfire preacher ringing in his ears. He must keep the voice in his mind still, otherwise he will come to believe that he is waiting to meet his unspeakable terror instead of a laundry maid. There are dim lanterns about the place, and they cast pale light along the cavern that stretches out beneath the palace.

‘What is this place,’ the priest mutters.

‘Easy, man,’ the guard snickers. ‘It is only the winter kitchen. We have to go through it to get to the laundry. Can’t take you through the main entrance, the Graf is entertaining strange - hrm - important visitors.’

‘Oh.’ The priest hugs his arms to his side and follows the guard in silence.

They travel in darkness for what seems to the priest as a long time, perhaps too long, when they come to a small square that hangs above their heads and lets in a pale light. ‘Watch the stairs,’ the guard mutters, and the priest stumbles up the stairs,

through the door held open by the guard and into a small stone courtyard where the air is damp, still, and stinks of tallow soap and lye.

Two women are bent over a wooden tub made dark by the water and slick suds.

The guard clears his throat. 'Gentleman here to see Regina.'

One woman turns from her work and faces the priest. The cloth in her hands drops limp back into the dirty water. The priest stares at her, confused. The girl looks somewhat like Regina, but he cannot quite place the difference in her face.

'Get back to your work,' the other woman croaks, not looking up from her rhythm of cloth, scrubbing board and elbows. She does not look at the priest.

'But Tante,' the young girl hisses.

'But Tante nothing. You are here to work, so work!' the older woman snaps.

Before the young woman turns back to the tub and its grey water, she whispers 'She's not here. She's in her room.'

The guard sighs, and signals the priest to follow him before the priest has time to think, *How did she know?*

The priest cannot orient himself in the maze of the servants' quarters. He passes from room to room without recognizing a pattern of path, without even a corridor to mark his memory, allowing himself to be led by the sullen guard. Eventually they enter a small room with doors in both east and west walls, and they stop.

'Here you are, sir,' the guard mutters and leaves the priest without another word. He looks at the bare bed, unmade, a little dusty, with worn and patched petticoats strewn here and there. *Why doesn't the maid clean this?* he thinks before he

reminds himself *because she is working and has not the time for it*. It is a thought that makes him feel glum for a moment. He cannot imagine why this mood comes onto him until he thinks of his own cell, which is luxurious in comparison. He knocks on the west door, wondering what the smell is that makes him wrinkle his nose. He knocks again, and when there is no answer he grasps the latch and shakes it undone, flinging back the door.

The smell that emanates from the darkness in front of him makes him choke, and he arranges his sleeve over his nose before he enters the room.

As soon as he has adjusted his senses to the smell and the darkness, he notices a flicker of light to his left, and a tiny murmuring from the same area. He steps into the room, breathes through the sweat and ink scented sleeve, and pushes the door half shut behind himself. Regina is kneeling before a statue of the Holy Mother and Her Dead Son, a candle stub burning itself out as she chants, or sings. He cannot hear what her sound is.

‘Good God, how can you stand the *smell*?’ he blurts out.

Regina’s chanting or singing ceases. She sighs, a great expulsion of air that ripples from her body, disturbing the candle flame and making her chest curl inwards. The sight of her unhinges something deep within the priest’s abdomen.

‘Erm,’ he mumbles, ‘Miss Regina, I came, I came here -’

She inhales, a sharp sound, but does not turn to face him. ‘Why are you bothering me?’ she whispers. ‘You have had enough of me, and your mind and soul have already judged me.’

‘But, but . . .’ he cannot formulate the words to express the feeling that have drawn him to her. ‘But I want to *know*!’

‘You cannot.’ Her voice is low, and dark.

‘Now you are judging me!’ He is surprised at the vehemence with which these words throw themselves from his throat.

Regina turns her head, her chin poised over her shoulder, her eyelids flickering, the priest in the periphery of her vision. ‘Hmm’ she murmurs. ‘Hmm. I had not thought of that.’

The priest stands utterly still. He can barely bring himself to breath. Regina turns once more to the pieta in the corner, rocking her body to and fro.

She begins her singing chant again. When it stops, the priest is surprised at the silence. She stands up, bows to the statue, and turns to face the priest. Her face is hidden by the darkness, only her silhouette appears in front of him. The dim candle light flickers behind her.

‘Very well,’ she says. ‘You will listen to me. I will talk to you. Shall I bring you a seat?’

The priest breathes deeply, and lets the sleeve drop from his nose. Regina opens the door and a pale light cuts through darkness, rendering the candle’s beam quite useless.

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Part II

Scarcely after one month since Johannes Klement had passed on, did he manifest on the 29th of July, 1641, between eleven and twelve o'clock, to the Halstadt Maiden Regina, in Halstadt itself, also in her father's house; he knocked three times on the bed of the Maiden, and showed that he was no longer a sleeper. His garment was white and reached to his soles, his form was that of an old man; he stayed a long while before the frightened girl and then disappeared.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p96

I awoke.

I was in my mother's house.

I awoke.

My mother's house, where I had been born, where I knew every night-sound, every creak of every floor board. Every dark looming shape of furniture I knew; the worn wooden chairs - their legs ceased to reach out for me in the night and trip me when I was still a girl, my toes and shins are no longer sensitive to their clubbing. Even the rattle of the tin plates in the sideboard - even now I still can hear the pitch of each one as it strikes the other whenever a mouse, or my sister, or my father, would glide by searching for foodscraps in the pantry. Sometimes even the forks and knives in the drawer sang whenever a piece was found. Though this was not often. Sometimes even the milkjug; the pouring of bluemilk sounds thinner than the pouring of cream.

And they thought I could not hear them.

I, in my mother's house, I knew every sound in the night. Long ago I stopped fearing the night. Despite the stories they would tell me, the hellish demons that lurked underneath my bed to try and pinch my toes, and then my soul.

I, in my mother's house. I knew it was only the furniture, or a rat under the bed that could touch me. And anyway, in the dark, all noises sound louder than in the day. But this is just plain talk - in my mother's house, each sound had two souls - night and day, and neither was more evil nor better than the other. They just were, and just as we poor humans try to make our voices heard, so did the wood of the furniture, the stones of the house, the dirt of the road outside. Sometimes I could lie awake and listen to their chatter, as a child listens to the gossip of the weaving women, the sewers, the spinners. And like a child hiding behind a door, I could hide in the night and listen to the gossip of the night.

In my mother's house.

I awoke

I opened my eyes.

The night looks different each night, each season. With each turn of cold or warmth the night air rearranges itself. The dark shows up the tiny things in the air that one can't see in the day. My mother keeps her colours dark so that the dirt doesn't show. She is practical. No fine light lace in case the stains show, the dirt attaches itself. But the dirt does show up on dark colours, in a different way. A water stain on a dark grosgrain skirt spreads out; the mark stretches out like a ripple on a pond, and then sinks into the pattern of the fabric and disappears from sight like that ripple sinking. But underneath the pond the hasterman can catch that ripple, like the grosgrain can capture that water stain. The dark does not hide stains, does not hide

dirt, only shows them in a different light. Shows up, perhaps, the side of the stain that doesn't come as quickly to the eye as a jam smear on a light apron. On a dark skirt one can *feel* the jam stain. One can't see it, but it is there. Like the night air. One can't *see* everyday things, one can't pick up a piece of mending and stitch a straight line, but one can feel things. One can feel the air sitting over the everyday things, one can see the air move.

My sister says she closes her eyes tight every night so that she can't see the ghosts, but really, the ghosts she fears are only the patterns of the night and the dark, the dark things the sun burns away with its heat and light.

There is nothing to be afraid of in the night.

It is simply the nature of the night. It is no better or worse than the nature of the day.

I awoke in the night, in my mother's house.

I awoke in the night, my friendly, teeming night.

I saw the dark air gather itself up and heave. My belly contracted.

I closed my eyes tight.

And then I saw the tiny specks of night-dust, dark-light, thicken. Dark, darker than dark. A nothing heaved in front of me. An oval round of *nothing* opened at the edge of my bed, spreading its *nothing* shadow on my bed sheets. The *nothing* did not even reflect the light of the moon that usually made my sheets brighter. It seemed to absorb my moonlight like the sea-sponge my sister gypped out of a travelling peddler absorbs water.

My belly heaved. I wanted to reach for my night-chamber. I could not move.

I awoke, frozen. I knew this thickening *nothing* before my bed was going to swallow me, pinch me, take *me* into some void.

My tongue was frozen. I could not scream for the Holy Mother's help.

In my mother's house I awoke and confronted *nothing*.

All the chatter of the night was dead. My mouth filled with the taste of nothing, a dryness, no water there to help me speak. No life.

No life near this *nothing*.

My ears were aching, robbed of any sound to fill them.

And then a knock.

A hollow, obscene, echo that would break your heart. And another.

And one more.

And then the air around the black *nothing* began to shimmer. The air moved. I could not. The air danced and shivered and buzzed with a different light, gold and black specks that rearranged themselves into first one shape and then another.

This was not, though, the light of summer, or autumn or spring or winter, dancing against the night. This was not touchable.

I did not know what this was, and so I willed my eyes to close, but they would not obey.

And then the *nothing* was a form. An old man sat at the end of my bed, dressed in one of those horrible old nightdresses worn by the sick and the dead. He turned towards me, reached out for me.

My body was frozen but I knew that my heart was going to burst. He . . . *It* was going to touch me. How can *nothing* touch? My belly gave me a sharp pain, I

knew I was going to bleed. My back, frozen and stiff as it was, rang with agony. The sheets, the plain linen sheets, tore at my skin.

It reached for me. Again, I willed my leg to move but it lay as a corpse's leg would lie; even stiffer than rigid death.

It cackled.

With the sound the old men make sometimes at either my sister or me when we dress in our Best.

At that point I knew I was going to die.

And then the sweet voice of the town's nightwatchman blurting out over his slivovic breath, 'Midnight, all clear.'

My father tells me that I woke the house up, as well as the neighbours', with my screaming.

*

Meanwhile, Regina's aunt, who also had the younger sister, asked if Regina wished to come to Pressburg - the pretext was that there was no domestic work in Halstadt, but the truth was that both girls were to be returned to the Lutheran belief.

Regina went to Pressburg by boat, and near Stein, which lies in the Danube, the ghost manifested again, on the ship, at the same time, in the same clothes, without speech, just the same as the first time! This appearance transformed her well-being into great-fear and she now had, as she will in the future, with all possible ways and manners, from the pestering, a need of relief.

She implored for God's help, obliged herself to a holy vow, through her entire life the Beloved Mother of God to honour, to fast strictly every Saturday, warm food to forgo, and in addition, daily before sleep to conscientiously perform her prayers.

And still the troublesome spirit did not abate.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p96

Holy Mother, Holy Mother, Holy Mother, help me.

Help me.

He is here again.

And I am nowhere safe.

I am nowhere and the *nothing* is here with me.

What have I done, Holy Mother? Why have you deserted me?

You have sent me to be with my sister, so far away, in that city which is so big and yet so backward. So *strange*. They speak Hungarian there and I won't be understood. I won't be able to tell anyone about the *nothing*, and if I scream they won't see what I see.

You sent me to my aunt to work, and I willingly went so that I could fill my life with something. To relieve the burdens; your's, Mother, of having an unmarried and useless daughter, and mine, this *nothing* invading my soul and filling it with so much black bile.

My sister should be there to greet me. My sister, another part of you, mother.

Holy Mother, Holy Mother, Holy Mother, help me.

Be with me.

I am on this ship alone, on this black water, and it is here again.

And if you take it away, Mother,

take me away, Holy Mother,

safely,

I will

honour-you-night-and-day-and-say-my-prayers-to-you-every-night-and-to-

fast-every-Saturday-and-to-only-ever-eat-cold-food-and-to-be-a-good-girl-and-work-

hard-day-and-night-and-night-and-day

only

save me Holy Mother, from this *nothing*.

Mother, where are you?

*

Hardly had she come to Pressburg, he began to frequently pester her, in that he manifested two times weekly. The house where the manifestation happened was splendidly positioned in the suburbs, not far from the castle, the house which the high-born Her Graf Paul van Pálffy has built in a short time.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p96-97

It is wonderful!

Stepping from the boat, away from that cold, green water.

Away from the cold, black black night. I left something behind me, on that ship.

I left it behind; a small package, dried up and shrivelled on that awful bunk. It sits there still, for all I know, and much good may it do to whoever sleeps in that stink-hole again.

Maybe they won't see it though - maybe they'll only feel it. That awful thing there. I closed my eyes and thought of my sister all night. I prayed and prayed and prayed that she will be there to meet me at the end of all this, and there she is! I can see her there on the landing, she looks fat and happy!

Oh, I wish I could brush my hair right now! So that she can see how well it's grown, how much thicker it is now, how much longer! Oh, I don't want to wait! My sister, my little sister is here! I would jump up and down, but these boards are wet, and -

my knees are twitching, I can feel it. I am going to jump.

Oh, she can see me! Look she is jumping too!

It is wonderful!

Quick, let down the plank so that I may dance with my sister on safe ground.

Quick, men, please hurry. I must get off this ship. See, there is my pretty little sister.

What?

No, I am not going to tell you her name, sir, nor where she lives in the city!

Can you not see our aunt, who is standing next to my sister?

What do you think we are?

Well, pardon me!

Let me down, let me be the first to touch ground! Please, men, let me get off now. I don't care what you do with my cases - throw them after me if you must, just let me get down.

There - that wasn't so difficult. Don't tell me that they have to secure the boat, or whatever it is. That plank is as safe as anything; see, I am light, I won't sway the wood.

Now then! If you won't hand me over the rail, I'll go over it myself! Just watch!

Whooooops! That wood is slippery. I'll just be careful now. One foot after another.

Don't stand there shouting behind me - I must walk carefully and slowly, so that I won't fall in!

Only

look at Tante's face!

Doesn't she look angry!

Quick, wink at Magdalena.

Magda, little Magdi.

My pretty little sister. One foot in front of the other and then only two more steps. I wish those horrible men behind me would stop their *shouting*. I can't walk straight with all their noise. One more step, one more so that I won't fall

Off.

Oh, this horrible water. It's so *thick*!

Ugh, get me out of here, you horrible men. Stop laughing at me!

My cheeks are hot. Oh Mother-of-God get me out of this stinking river! Look, my skirt is floating right around my waist; someone might *see* something. Hail Lady, get me out of this mess! I will look like such a scarecrow now! Magdi -

I can't look at her -

is laughing her fat little head off!

Quick, you nasty men, throw me that rope! There! Not so far away, you louts!

It is so cold!

I hate this river. I hate this bank. I hate that ship, I hate the night, I hate this city. I hate them laughing. I hate this dress, I hate my hair, I hate those men, and I especially hate the look on their faces! Now how can I greet my family like this? This is so, so

ridiculous

Ouch - my bottom is freezing! How on earth can they pull me out with my legs showing to the whole world? Quick, push that skirt down.

I hate wool. I hate wool skirts. I hate this river I hate water I hate everything everything everything. I hate that rope; it keeps sliding out of my hands.

What?

Hold it?

What in the name of all that's Holy do you *think* I am trying to do? There. I have it.

'Stop laughing, Magdalena - it makes you look fat. Just get me a blanket.'

Her round little body shakes.

‘Come here’ she says.

‘But I am so wet! You’ll catch a cold, sweetheart.’

‘Don’t be so silly.’

She embraces me, and despite the blanket I can feel how her chest has become bigger and softer since the last time we embraced, on the other end of this journey.

It is good, good to be in her arms again!

‘Well, my wise old sister,’ she whispers, pushing away the wet hair that sticks to my ear. ‘Welcome to Pressburg!’

‘I - I thought of you last night, on the ship.’

She looks into my eyes.

She looks

and I am pulled into the green pools that are the doors to my sister’s soul, I can feel her entering my head and roaming around in there, just as for a moment I can enter into her and I see a warm pink glow, the soft and lovely home that is my Magdalena.

I shiver. It is cold again.

‘I heard you calling me’, she wraps the blanket about my shoulders tightly. ‘But I didn’t seem to be able to reach you.’

A thud, and then another thud.

So they did throw my trunk after me.

Tante, my Tante, shrieks and then runs to stop it from bouncing back into the river. Her cloak flaps in the wind, and she tries not to pull her skirt up as she goes, and it trips her up a little. Her face is very, very red.

Magdi's body is shaking. She is keeping the corners of her mouth turned down, I can see the little crease in her cheeks straining. She pokes me in the ribs, and I hit her back, only to stop the laughter from leaving my body too.

Tante, my Tante.

She looks like a flapping big black crow.

'She hasn't improved much,' Magdi says.

We stand, waiting for her. I am only relieved that the trunk did not burst, for then where would we be with all my possessions scattered about in public like that? That would be funny.

The sun shines. I am warmed, a little. I am warmest where Magdi's arm lies around me, warmest where her soft body touched mine at the side. It is as when we were small, and winter would force us to huddle together day and night. She is beginning to feel a little like mother.

Here comes Tante.

Oh, is she angry.

She is looking me up and down.

I must look a fright, and Magdi's finery is getting soaked with this smelly water.

And she is dragging my trunk. She lets go of the handle and it lands with a

thump

that rattles its timber at my feet.

‘Poor girl,’ she huffs

then wheezes

then huffs again.

‘You look like trouble.’

It causes me great pain to hold in my scream as Magdi pokes a remarkably sharp finger into my ribs.

*

Here I am, in my little room, in this big big castle.

It is too grand for me.

As we walked from the dock to here, I was afraid. Even home is not this big. The cobblestones hurt my feet - they are different from those back where my mother and father are. I can’t explain it. They make my feet ache more. It is horrible.

Magdi seems to like it though, she was running all over the place as Tante and I heaved my trunk between us on the way to this place. Every time she waved to someone, I could see Tante wanting to drop my trunk and do something to her - catch her, or something. Slap her, maybe. I know Magdi. She just is like that. She was that way at home, only

less so.

This big place has done something to her. 'Don't mind me,' she said to Tante, winking at some boy who was dressed in a gown - of all things! Some sort of student, she said. They often come here to look in the Baron's library, she said.

'And do you find yourself cleaning in the library too?' I asked her.

'Oh well, one is paid for doing one's duty!' she told me.

This big city is too big.

Too grand.

The houses here are all so rich! Nothing is old or worn, and there are new buildings going up everywhere. I think that -

I think that

I am missing my mother's home.

They have given me this tiny, tiny room, and Thank the Mother it is next to Magdi's little room, but I know I shall find myself crawling in beside her soon. I must talk with her, tell her of these horrible things that have been happening to me. Oh, but what if they lock the doors at night? What then? She is so far away from me already, so plump and wordly, and I must seem like such a *peasant* - falling in the river like a bale of hay, or something! I must, I

must

behave better, like mother told me to. I must

not be clumsy, I must not drop anything, or burn all the linen, and I must make sure that everything goes so well that there will be no reason to scold me, or even notice me. Look at the beautiful clothes they have left for me here. I

can't wear them. They are too fine. I am still so wet, and I know I am making a puddle of the bed linen under me, but I can't put them on. I will mess them. I can't

go into the kitchen and get dry because I do not know where the kitchen is. Everyone has left me here in this tiny room in this huge castle in this enormous city and I am all alone and I know I am, I feel I am going to

cry.

I don't know what is outside the door. They told me that I had to put on those new shoes before I should start my work, but I don't even want to bend down and unlace my boots, my comfortable boots who have been with me on this whole horrible journey so far. I am going to cry.

I am crying, and I

should not be. I should be grateful that I am here, working, with my family, my sister, my mother's sister, in this exciting city with all sorts going on night an day. I should be happy. I *must* be happy, and I will *make* myself so before anyone sees me like this. At least I will take my wet clothes off and put something warm on. It is so stupid to sit here and feel like this. I am sure I have work to do, somewhere. Otherwise I will not earn my keep and they will send me back.

Maybe they will send me back. What if they

send me back?

What's that?

'For all the saints' sake, Regi, don't jump so when I walk in the room!'

'Oh, oh, you frightened me! Here I am, half undressed and you just run into the room like that. Someone might see!'

'Don't be such a goose - we used to run around like that all the time back at home.'

‘Yes, well, we’re in Pressburg now.’

See, she makes a face at me. Maybe she hasn’t changed that much, after all.

‘Do you want me to help you unpack your chest? They want you to report to the kitchen as soon as you are settled.’

‘Magdi, I can’t put these fine clothes on.’

‘What nonsense! When I got here I couldn’t wait to take off my horrible old things!’

‘Don’t call them that! Mother made them for us!’

‘Yes, well, we’re not on the outskirts anymore. What did mother send for me?’

No, no change in her at all. How wonderful.

‘I won’t give it to you, since you’re so spoiled here then! You should be able to afford to buy your own fine things by now!’

‘Regi - please, mother must have sent me something. Give it to me. I know it’s there, I can read your thoughts, remember!’

‘Hush!’

No, Mother of God, not now, not here.

‘Magdi, don’t look at me like that. We can’t do that here. We’re grown women now, and it’s not appropriate. What if someone finds out? Remember when father -’

‘Father was influenced by Halstadt gossips - they’re the very ones who turn in on their own kind first. You and I both know that Oma Rosa was nothing but a soft old woman who liked cats and grew pretty plants in her garden, and that was all. Now, where’s my present?’

‘Shouldn’t we just sit and talk a little first?’

‘No time, no time! There is much more work here than back at home!’

‘But how are you? How is Tante? What are the people like here? Will I like it?’

‘I am wonderful, as I always am, the people here are kind, you will learn to like it once you have settled in, and Tante wants us to go back to the Lutherans with her.’

No, Mother of God, not now, not here. I must sit down again.

‘Surely not that old nonsense again?’

‘Yes, I am afraid so. So be careful of what you say around her.’

‘All the more reason why we can’t -’

‘Can’t think to each other?’

‘Yes, exactly.’

Magdi, don’t look into my eyes now. We are in Pressburg, where there are too many eyes and ears. Remember what it was like in Halstadt those few times we went there as children. Magdi, don’t look at my soul now. We shouldn’t do this here. Please, I beg you. Not now.

At least let us wait until there is a quiet moment for us
to talk.

‘So, give me something from mother.’

‘Tsk, always the little duchess! Here, it is with my prayers. Just let me open
the envelope.’

‘Oh, a four-leaf clover! Oh, how precious! Mother must have hunted for this!’

‘Put it away in your Bible and don’t let Tante see.’

‘Yes, she might have us for witches.’

Magdi, don’t say those terrible things. They might come
true.

*

Magdi has left and I am shaking. Those terrible shoes, they
stare at me from their corner, they are like the
eyes of young wolves, their shiny leather too sleek, too
hungry, they look like they want to eat my poor old country boots, my faithful
old friends who have never left my side, who are cracked and broken and let the snow
in and smell like the mud of the fields and forests but who accompanied me from
home
and whom I love more than any fancy new ambitious shoe that I am forced to
wear.

Why did I agree to come? Why, Holy Mother, did I say *yes* when they asked me to come here and to enter this huge city, why did I listen when they told me that I would see wonderful new things and have many new adventures and see Magdi again and go to see the castle and the cathedral and work for learned and rich noble people? Why did I agree?⁸ I am so

afraid. This room is

awful, it is so

stuffy, and I hate that empty little ante-chamber right before me. It makes every footstep that passes in the hallway echo echo echo right into this room, and I know that I will never have a night's sleep if the people here are anything like at home, when they roam about the house at all hours, knocking over things, dropping bits of food; and there are far more people here than at home too. Why, why, *why* did I agree to come here and work? Why did mother allow me to come? Didn't she know that there would be all sorts of dangers here for me? Didn't she *remember* what Tante is like? I don't

want

to go to the Lutherans. I want to be left

alone. I want to go back to the forest and be by myself and breath in the fresh green air and see the sky and taste the first clean snow and be so still among the leaves that the animals and birds will come to greet me. There are no trees here, and the streets stink, and the horses here are so big and brutish, one couldn't offer them a carrot even if I could find one, and I can't take anything from the kitchen in case they

⁸ The Holy Mother answers; 'But, my beautiful child, you did not agree to this. Your family were afraid for you, and directed you to the city themselves.'

might think that I am a thief and then something very, very bad would happen. Holy Mother protect me.

This room is very dark. I certainly hope that I do not have to spend too much time here.

Listen, someone is passing.

No, they have stopped. Outside my antechamber, my horrid little parlour. Yes, they are coming through, just listen to the sound of the hob-nail boots against the stone.

‘Come in, please.’

‘There you are.’

‘Hello Tante.’

‘Don’t you stand to greet your relatives? Goodness me, such manners! Remember you are in Pressburg now. Remember who you are working for.’

‘I am sorry Tante.’

‘My dear, although you are such a big girl now, we must talk.’

‘What about?’

Oh Holy Mother help me. One of Tante’s talks.

‘Well, Regina, dear. . . ’

Out of her mouth that sounds like an insult!

‘ . . . as I said before, you are in Pressburg now, this is quite an important city. Here we mind our manners in the city way. We do not rush about and act like country folk. We try our hardest to behave, and to please our masters in every way.’

‘I see, Tante. Is there anything in particular that I must remember? Any rules of the house that I must learn before I begin my work here?’

‘Firstly, do not let yourself be seen too much. Go about your work quietly, and when you are not working, or on any errands that take you out of the house, try to remain in your room as much as possible.’

No, no. Look how small the window is. There is almost no light!

‘Secondly, you must keep your appearance up at all times. I would like to take the clothes that you brought from home and burn them. They will look awfully out of place here, and there is no real need to keep them. Your boots as well. I see that you have not taken them off your feet yet. I can almost smell them from here. The house will provide you with whatever you need, indeed, you have more than enough clothes here already.’

Oh, my faithful friends! This is out of the question. Holy Mother, Tante *can't* just take my things away like that! I'll have to ask Magdi.

‘Thirdly, remember that you are here to work. Too much nonsense between yourself and your sister will not be tolerated. Cabals of any sort are not tolerated amongst the servants. You must not spend too much time with your sister.’

‘But are we not to work together?’

‘That is of no consequence. You know what I mean.’

Oh dear. Is she becoming silly?

‘Yes Tante. Is there anything else that I need to know before I begin?’

‘Just be a good girl and conduct yourself quietly and in a dignified manner.

Another thing, Herr Graf himself is a tolerant man. Those of his servants who lean towards the Lutheran ways are allowed to go about their own business. If you know what I mean.’

‘Yes Tante.’

I must not laugh I must not laugh I must not laugh I must not laugh I must not
laugh I must not laugh I must not laugh I must not laugh I must not laugh I must not
laugh I must not laugh I must not laugh I must not laugh I must not . . .

*

She is gone now. I can’t tell you what a relief that is. My whole body is
sagging with the comfort of it. And a giggle or two *seems* to want to come out.

She is

a silly woman. She is

funny but right now I am completely

alone.

Those new shoes, the wolves, they are sleek and shining, and they are smooth, and they have no cracks in their sides, their tongues stand straight and do not sag, their eyelets gleam and are so dark at the same time, the new shoes, they stare at me. I don't

like

the way they look at me. They frighten me, and as I stare and stare at them they edge away into a darkness right there in the corner and I can't see them anymore, but I can see the walls behind them, the walls leading to the ceiling, the rough walls which look like the walls at home but

are not.

Home walls are always clean, home walls are whitened every spring, home walls where Magdi and I would cover our hands with whitewash and spread our hand prints all over them before mother could see and wash them over. Home walls which stood around nothing more than our little family, home walls which protected us from everything, from the gossip of the neighbourhood, from the men outside who wanted to take Oma Rosa. Home walls so sweet and clean and who kept the

warmth

in.

These walls keep something in. They keep me in. They keep me in and don't want to let me out. These walls are keeping the dark in, and me in the dark here, I can smell how damp they are. These walls have not been cleaned for years and years. These walls have spoors in their stone, spoors like a toadstool before the rain, just waiting to be released. These walls are too dark. Even if I set about it now and worked all night, I would not be able to clean these walls. This room has been built around

nothing. This room has been made to fold around an emptiness, and now that I am here inside it, this room does not like me. Oh, I don't like this
smell.

See how the air is so heavy, that tiny window in the corner up there, where can the light shine in? Where is the air? The door holds it in. And the tiny amounts of air that come through from the hallway are made to wait in the anteroom, wait until it is old and stale, and when it come into this room it is damp, and sits on the lungs. Although, if this room has not seen anyone else for so long, the air has had no lungs to sit on. Oh Holy Mother, I

know

I am going to be ill here. I don't want to breath this air. I don't want to sit here in this dark room, and I don't want to put on my horrible new shoes, and I don't want to be alone here. Something

might

happen.

Holy Mother, now I'm frightening me. Now I

will not

look into the corner, because it is so dark there, and Heaven-only-knows-what-might-be-there and I do not want to see it. I

will not

see it. It is not there. I will light a candle except it is the middle of the day and that would be an extravagance that might have consequences here. I do not know. I

will not

sit here any longer, I will put on my shoes and go out and learn what I must do here. But that would mean I must reach into the darkness and stir the darkness and I

will not

do that. Holy Mother I am afraid.⁹ Please send me a light to drive this darkness away, I beg you. I

will not

have that darkness stirred up again, I left it on the boat and I know that it is sitting there, back on boat, far away from me, just put aside like a stone, just as Oma Rosa taught me to put aside my anger, just put it away, leave it behind me, step away from it and leave it there to allow the earth take care of it, to send the badness into the earth like manure and let the earth feed from it and then grow lovely things from its old rottenness. I have left myself behind. I have left my self behind on the boat. On the water, in a room, a disgusting little cabin where it might not be able to get out. Maybe it's gone into the walls, maybe it couldn't sink into the earth if the room in the boat is on water. Maybe I just left the darkness *there* to stay in the room and bother whoever next uses the room. Maybe somebody let it

out

[a scream]

'Regi, what in heaven are you *doing* here sitting in the dark? They're waiting for you in the laundry!

⁹ The Holy Mother answers; 'I will protect you, my child, but be careful where you place your will.'

‘Regi, don’t shout so! Whatever is the matter? Why are you . . . Here, let me touch you! What in the Holy Mother’s name is *wrong* with you?’

‘Come Regi, come into my arms, stop crying, please. There’s nothing to be afraid of, you’ve done this work time and time before. It’s nothing. You will make me proud. Here. Dry your eyes. Yes, yes I *know* that’s my apron, but I haven’t anything else at the moment. Just use it.

‘There. Don’t worry about the stains. They have things here that can clean them. I’ll just have to show you. Now, what’s all this commotion? What’s the matter with you?’

‘No, I can’t hear you if you have your hands over your mouth. No, sister, you can tell me. I don’t care if you think it’s stupid. No, I don’t think you’re mad, remember how it was at home. Mother’s not here now, and I think if I could help her, I can help you.

‘No Regi, you *will not* be forced to go through the same things. There, there. Sssshhhhhhh.

‘It’s terribly dark and smelly in here. Don’t you want to light a candle?’

‘Yes, I know it’s the middle of the day. But we’re working for the high-born Herr Graf. He has candles falling out of his ears. Yes, yes he sends someone out to the candle-maker whenever he needs more. Or rather, he sends Tante out to get them. Or rather, Tante is the one in charge of the housekeeping and she knows when it is time to get some more. No, no the Herr Graf himself is a tolerant man, and he allows an extra candle expense because of the students who work late into the night in his library sometimes. No-one will notice if you keep a candle in here, no-one will mind at all. The students *often* ask me to bring them more candles. Some of them are very -

‘No, I can’t see anything in the corner except your working shoes. Only that it is a little bit too gloomy. This is an awful room, and it does stink.

‘Oh? I can’t remember which room I had on the boat coming here. I can’t remember if it smelled worse than this one does. No, I didn’t leave anything behind me on the boat. You know I’m a very organized girl! What did you leave behind you? Is it anything important? We can always ask the captain of the boat when he passes on his way back through -

‘SSSSShhhh!!! Don’t scream so, it hurts my ears. No, nobody else can hear you. Everyone’s back in the Graf’s house, and we are alone here now. I told Tante to leave you in peace for a while, so that you could get used to the quarters here. Oh, I just came back to see how you were, you know that I know -

‘No, of *course* I *will not* tell anyone! Least of all here. The Herr Graf is a good man, but I think there are some things which he would not understand too well.

‘Oh, well if it’s that important to you. I swear on the Holy Mother’s name that I *will not* tell anyone anything. Is that better? Good. There, there. That’s more like my Regi. Quiet but bright. If you like, I can get Tante to allow me to sleep in that little room outside yours.

‘How? Oh, well, I have my ways around her! It will be fun, more like at home. If I stay outside your door I can protect you from anything coming in. I can be like a guard, like old Pepi. Remember how he would lie on the doorstep all day in the sun? We all thought he was just a lazy old hound, but remember how he would bite any stranger trying to come in? Poor old thing! I can lie at the foot of your door and growl at anyone trying to get to you!

‘Yes, yes it *is* funny. You see? And when you are up to your neck in linen and lye you won’t think about this room at all. You’ll be so busy, and you’ll get so tired, all this room will be is a place to sleep until the next day, and the next load of washing. There. Good girl. Dry your eyes, let me comb your hair back into place.

‘We must get back to the kitchen now, so that I can introduce you to the rest of the Graf’s household family.’

*

Dearest Holy Mother. Now I am in bed and Magdi is sleeping outside my door and after all that work today I am very tired.

Let me blow out the candle because if I do not crawl into bed right now and fall asleep I don not know what will become of me. Ohh, I ache so! I really could use a good liniment rub at this moment, maybe some arnica and peppermint to soothe my aching feet. Those awful new shoes, those awful new shoes.

How they pinch! And yet, and yet, I cannot see how I could wear my muddy old boots walking on the fine carpet that the Graf seems to have everywhere. Oh, how those beautiful silk rugs would be ruined! Magdi says that one of them is

Turkish!

Holy Mother, I know they say the Turks are heathens and will burn and all the rest, but how could such a beautiful thing be made by a heathen? Isn’t that silly?

The Graf must be either very daring, or very understanding to have such a thing in his house. It is so very soft, and so very silky, and not even the finest cobwebs could make such a beautiful rug. And to imagine I want to wear my old country boots all over it! Oh, wouldn't mother enjoy looking at such a thing! Father, I think, would want to burn it but that is of no concern to me right now. Dearest

Holy

Mother.

If I yawn once more my head will fall off. But the lye fumes have made my eyes sting, and it hurts a little to close them, no matter how much they close of their own tired will. Maybe I will just

sit

on my bed and rub my feet before I lie down. Listen -

Magdi is already snoring. I do hope that she won't keep me awake, fine watchdog as she is.

So still, so

quiet, and so

dark. The air in here is so

heavy

and the tallow is beginning to

smell

Is that the scurry of a mouse over there? Or am I just

imagining it? Look, the moonlight moves

through that slit of a window so high up above me head, the

pale light, the
pale pale light is getting
darker. Are those flecks dancing about in the
moonlight? Am I seeing things?

Oh, it has become

cold!

So

very

cold

Holy Mother, help me to

move, let me get under the bedsheets at least I need to go under something
because I am so cold and I see now that the light is getting darker and there is that

thing

sitting right

next

to

me

Holy-Mother-help-me-help-me-help-me-help-me-help-me-help-me-help-me-
help-me-help-me-help-me-help-me-help-me-help-me-help-me-help-me-help-me-help-
me-help-me-help-me-help-me-help-me

there is

no

thing

sitting beside me again

what is that the candle has gone out and I have not touched it look at me I am
barely breathing there cannot have been any air it is so still in here what are you doing
to me you

nothing!

Let me breath, oh Holy Mother let me breathe I cannot breath oh please let me
have some air

don't

touch me you

nothing

that is so silly you cannot touch me you are *nothing* you are a black hole in all
this darkness and not even the flecks of moonlight can shine through you get away
from me get away from me get away from you horrid

old man

?

DON'T

touch me

Holy Mother what

is this?

Who is this?

No, this is the *nothing*, this is

no

thing

even if you show me your grey old beard and your

coffin robe

get that mouldy old shroud

away

from me!

keep away keep away keep away from me or

I

will

scream

I left you behind me, I left you

what are you doing here why have you come for me, get away from me, keep
away from me I think I will scream I think I will scream I think I will

[scream]

‘Oh Magdi, Oh Magdi, Oh Magdi, can’t you see it? Can’t you see it there, it’s
sitting right next to me, can’t you get him to leave me alone? Holy Mother, Magdi,
mother, help me, help me, help me . . .’

‘What? What in heaven’s name is the matter with you? I was sleeping!’

‘Can’t you see it?’

‘What? What?’

‘The . . . the . . . thing! It’s sitting right next to me!’

‘What thing? There’s nothing here! Look, let me light a candle.’

[two screams]

[a candle flames up]

‘You see? You see? I didn’t light that and neither did you! That thing did it!’

‘Here, let me hold you. In fact, let me get into bed with you. There is something here and it’s not going to touch you.’

‘Don’t blow out the light.’

‘No, let it burn itself out.’

*

I feel sick. I am

sick. The lye from the laundry-house is making me very, very

ill. I know I would feel better if only I could smell some

grass, some leaves, a wild herb or something like that, a stream maybe. But this lye, it turns my hands red, my skin cracked, and I am faint. My shoes pinch, my clothes are thin and I am cold. Magdi is off dusting in the Graf’s library or something similar, and Tante pretends not to watch me like a hawk watching a field-mouse. I can feel her glare on me every time I stir the kettle with the stick, every time I reach for something, every time I place another delicate piece of lace into the water. I know she is waiting for me to make a mistake, I can *feel* it. I

know

I am going to drop something soon. And I feel so

sleepy.

I hate this, I hate this, I need to sleep, but I must work. And I must work carefully and gently otherwise all of this fine lace and linen is going to be burned through with too much lye. It is not like the thick cotton and wool back at home, not even in Halstadt were the cloths so fine. I must be careful otherwise Tante is going to say something. I

don't want to hear her this morning. I

don't want to listen to anything she has to say otherwise I might just scream and drop something. I

must

strive to be as perfect as possible, a good girl, a simple girl with no offensive habits or manners. Holy Mother help me, because I *know* I am going to drop something and I mustn't.

'Regina, what are you doing?'

'What? What?'

'Regina, why are you not using the scrubbing board? That's what it is there for, you know.'

'But, but, Tante, you said that I shouldn't use it, that it was only for you to use.'

'What nonsense! Why would I have said such a thing?'

'I - I don't know, I am sorry.'

'Well, don't do it again.'

Heaven help me, what does she mean?

‘Regina,’

‘Yes?’

‘What are you doing with those ruffs?’

‘I, well, I am soaking the dirt from them.’

‘No, no, no!’

‘Pardon?’

‘No. That’s not what one does with ruffs. They need to *sprinkled* first, and then the dirt rises to the surface.’

‘Very well, Tante, I shall do that.’

This lye, it

stings so.

I can see no gloves for me to use, so I suppose I must pinch it with my fingers and sprinkle it over the stuff. And it stings. These dainty little things, they are dirty.

It is a pretty idea that all this high-born sweat should rise to the surface of this cambric, like frog-spoor rising to the surface of a pond. Although I dare say that I must not think of the Graf and his family as being dirty like the rest of us. I suppose it is easier to keep clean in a city such as this, with so many wells, and the big river, and of course, girls such as myself to keep the hundreds and hundreds of scraps of cloth clean. So much! I could never imagine having the need to wear so many garments, mother would have a *fit* if she saw how much these people have! I wonder what Oma

Rosa would think, dear Oma, she only ever had the one dress, the one shawl, and the boots which she said had lasted her a lifetime. There,

and there, and

oh! My fingers sting!

I wonder if any of this high-born dirt has risen yet?

It does not seem so.

Should I give it more time?

All it needs is a good soak in fresh water with a little salt. I

wonder

what Tante meant, with all this lye,

it seems to me that there is too much

of it around, and I wonder where all this waste water is going to go afterwards,

I hope not into the river, that river is dirty enough, and I hope not into the ground, the ground around here needs more grass, and what of all the cobblestones? Surely all this dirty water will not go onto to cobbles of the street? Although *they* are dirty enough to warrant a little harsh cleaning. It seems that city-folk do not bother all that much about keeping things clean. All the more reason to hire servants to do all the work. But then, who does the work back at home? Poor mother, I wonder how she is right now, if she thinks of us at all?

‘Regina!’

‘Ye-e-s?’

‘Regina, what is this?’

‘What is what, Tante?’

‘This, this great gaping *hole* in the middle of the Gräffin’s best cotton ruff?’

‘Tante, *what* are you talking about?’

‘Come here, you silly girl, and look at this. You have left the lye on the cotton too long and now it is ruined. Ruined, I tell you!’

‘You told me to sprinkle the lye on yourself!’

‘What nonsense! You should know, a big girl like you, that these dainty things need to be *soaked*, not sprinkled!’

‘But Tante, you *said* I had to sprinkle them, just a few moments ago!’

‘I would *never* have said such a nonsensical thing.’

‘But you did!’

‘Are you calling me a liar? Well? And where are you going? Come back here and help me repair this mess that you have made!’

She is *horrible*! She is worse than I remember her! Oh, this is awful, I

never

should have come here.

Holy Mother, why, oh why, did You send me here? I was

happy

in the woods, close to the town and still

far away enough to be amongst the forest and its creatures. I was

happy enough learning forest craft and

learning the old healing ways.

I

never wanted to come here, I

never

wanted to come to this horrible big city with

its tiny cramped bedroom and the

awful wash house, and all that

strange, extravagant

furniture and the hundreds of

useless clothes

that I must now wash forever . . .

Only,

now I don't know where I am

not even in this house, I am

somewhere

and the floors are made of marble,

and the chairs are black

black

wood and shining, and there is a

white alabaster

bust of someone

someone, it is so

white no one could be that white

unless they have had a fearful experience, it is whiter than snow and

I do not think

that I like

it.

And look at that mirror on the wall, look at the mirror, it is so
big
and look how the frame shines, it is gold, I am sure it is gold,
but no-one can have enough money to buy
so much
gold.

Look, I can see myself, I look so
pale, so
tired, look I look
unhealthy, my skin has never been so
grey, my hair, I need to comb my hair, look,
is that
me?

That is not me, that
could not
be
me.

I do not look like that, that is not my face, not my mouth, I wonder
who
that girl in the mirror is, she looks so
sad and
tired.

I know
that it should be me reflected there, but

it is

not

me.

Why is the light so dim in here?

Why am I so cold?

Why can I not recognize the face in the mirror before me?

That is not my face, but now

it is not even visible -

am I going blind? Have my eyes been burned with the

lye?

Who is that? What is that darkness, what is this hollowness, why is the room
behind me going so deathly dark?

Holy Mother, Holy Mother, it is the

nothing

again . . .

It is using me to

make itself visible.

DON'T

touch me,

old

man.

*

For many more months until Christmas did the apparition appear, and with each time became more troublesome.

A short time afterwards, the apparition placed itself near the cellar door, and she stumbled upon it when he wanted to embrace her. The Maiden was shaken to such a high degree, that for three weeks she needed to take to her bed.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p97

See,

look how my hands shake.

This is ridiculous, this is unfair, why is this happening to me? Why

is my life falling into this

nothing?

Why is it following me, dogging my steps from moment

to

moment,

what is this shadow, this

emptiness

always at my heels? What is this

devil?

Holy Mother

preserve

me

Dogging me, it is

dogging

me although I doubt that any dog would be so

persevering , so

constant, so

faithful,

it nips at my heels so, it

claws at my hem it

pulls down on my skirt and its

fingers are icy at my neck, so cold, so

nothing it cannot be it is nothing it is not there it is only my nerves and the change to the big city that is scaring me so, it cannot be anything other than that I will see an apothecary and get a tonic, surely it is only the constant work and the dank cold of my room and the watchful eyes of Tante and Magdi's overprotective gaze she is always watching me watching me, they both watch me although with different eyes, one set red and green and the other blue and steely I need a tonic because I am imagining things and it is only my constitution and my nerves that are giving way here in this city of stone and tall buildings and walls and loud loud clatter and the constancy of the people coming and going and the carefulness with which I must walk through this palace, this palace this place of decadence, there is too much luxury here how can one family own so much, even me, even little me I am the servant of all this wealth and do they have any idea how difficult it is managing their laundry?

Even in the wash house I must be

careful I must be

careful

because Tante is always watching me always scolding me I never seem to do things the way she wants them to be done and when she scolds I feel *its* fingers nipping at my heels, there is always a chill that runs down my back and the stench of the lye goes right through my body and I can't breathe I

can't

breathe

I must

breathe I must

feel the air in my lungs and smell something

wild and green

perhaps I might not go to the apothecary but instead take a walk onto the hill and find some herbs in the forest perhaps

that will cure me

before the celebrations before

Christmas before the Holy Mother gives birth again to the Son I cannot

be ill

for the Christ child, for the Holy Mother's child, I may not be

so

ill

herbs, I need something a tonic chamomile angelica, oh yes, angelica for protection, for exorcism, but where can I have a bath with it and who would ask

questions if I had it in my room, would that work without the proper prayers, anything I need to settle myself before the celebrations I know that these people here will double their laundry, I know that I will not have much time to celebrate with the Holy Mother I wonder if they venerate the statue of the Madonna and Child here like they did at home I wonder if I will have the time to fast before the feast, I wonder if Tante will approve of that, she does not like it when I keep my vows to the Holy Mother, she does not like it when I mention that I work so hard as a promise rather than a duty

I do not want to go

where she wants to take me.

Maybe Magdi can

help

She can read into my soul so well, she can look into my eyes and tell me what is troubling me remember when she knew Oma Rosa was becoming ill, remember how she knows whenever I need her perhaps she will come to me now, perhaps she can hear me now as she used to perhaps if I call her in my heart she will appear, Holy Mother I

know

I shouldn't really do this but if it makes me feel more protected

can it hurt?

Holy Mother is it

so wrong

for my sister to hear me, for You to hear my prayer and

send her to me?

Is it so wrong to pray for myself when
I am in so much
fear?

Oh! What
was that?

‘What in God’s good world are you doing, child?’

‘Tante! I - I was just -’

‘Never mind. Leave those linens. There is work to be done in the Graf’s library, and you must come at once.’

‘What, what work?’

‘Nothing special. Just some books need to be dusted, furniture polished, preparations for the Holy Season. Many of the students from the city have leave to go home for the holy days, so we need to clean the place properly. Come, come at once. Leave that washing and come with me.’

And so I must run after Tante, my hands still wet, catching at my apron to dry them, it flaps against my legs so, how can I catch up with her when these shoes are too tight, how can I run in this skirt, oh look, now I have missed the apron and wet the skirt instead.

What about the laundry?

‘Tante, TANTE! What about the laundry?’

‘Do not fret about it, this is much more important work. Hurry now.’

Holy Mother, how *big* this place is! One room after another, and we run along the corridor, scuttling in the servants’ passages and stairs, flashes of the richness that laugh at us as we run past the open doorways. How can one family live in all these rooms? And father thought we were rich enough with our few rooms and furniture! And what of Oma Rosa, she only had the one room herself, the tiny shack on the edge of the forest. I wonder how she kept it so warm in the winter?

Oh, I am cold. It must be my wet skirt, my wet hands, the laundry room is so steamy with the copper kettle-fire, and boiling water. Bother Tante, what does she want me to do in this cold huge place?

My feet my

feet feel strange. What is happening here, it is my heel, bother these shoes,

damn

these shoes, something is wrong here I hope that my heel is not going to fall

off

‘What is it *now*? You really are a clumsy ox of a girl!’

‘Ow, Tante, my heel must have come off. I knew these shoes wouldn’t last! Wretched flimsy things! Ow, my knees hurt! I think I have twisted my ankle! Help me up, please.’

Ow, Tante, you do not have to pull me up so hard.

‘Hurry along then. Never in all my born days have I seen such clumsiness. It is no wonder they can’t find you a husband, a great girl like you!’

Not this again. I have no time for this.

‘Please slow down a little, my ankle truly does hurt, Tante.’

‘With all this work to do? Heavens, child, we have so little time. I will go ahead and you can hobble behind me. The library. I am sure you know where it is by now.’

Let me just rest a while. If only I could unlace this shoe, maybe it would hurt less. Oh, there it

hurts

more

and now it hurts so much I cannot lace the shoe up again.

Maybe I will just rest here for a while. This is becoming

silly

and I am feeling ill. If only I had some sweet root, maybe that would settle my belly. I will just sit here and breath for a while, and

oh yes, that is what Oma Rosa told me, breath out the pain

let the limb let it go, see, let the pain trickle away into the stone beneath me, stone receive the pain this red hot feeling see it go into the stone and cool itself.

It is gone it is

gone it

is gone it is gone it is gone it is gone Holy Mother

heal me the pain is

gone.

And I am very, very

cold.

This wet skirt, it sticks to my legs so. Small wonder I fell

so easily. What would Oma Rosa say about this?

Let me think . . .

No, no I cannot remember.

‘What are sitting there for, you silly goose? Your behind must be frozen!’

‘Magdi?’

‘Who did you expect? The Graf himself, come to save you? He *is* a married man, you know. Perhaps one of the students who lounges around here so much? Pity, they’ve all gone home for the Holy Days. Really, sister, you should not make yourself so obvious!’

‘Magdi, don’t tease me like that. My heel came off and Tante left me to follow her.’

‘I know. I saw you.’

‘But I didn’t see you!’

‘I heard you thinking of Oma Rosa.’

‘Sssshhhh. Please. I do not know if Tante will come back to fetch me, she must be missing me by now.’

‘I doubt that! You know how she is.’

‘She made me leave the washing to come and do some cleaning. Do you think she’ll insist that she never told me to follow her?’

‘If I had spare money I would bet all of it on that certainty! What was it that you were thinking of Oma?’

‘I cannot remember. Just one of her little sayings, you recall? Something she used to say whenever one of us fell down, or tripped, or was held up from going somewhere. It seems to have flow right out of my head. Magdi, why are you looking at me like that?’

Magdi, what is it? You know you *cannot* do that here. They will find us out.

Magdi?

Holy Mother, return my sister to this place, in this time!

‘Hmm? What is it Regi?’

‘Nothing. Listen, who is that coming up the corridor? Should we move on?’

Oh! My ankle!’

‘What in heaven’s name are you two girls doing here? Magdalena, you should be on the other side of the house, in the kitchen! Regina, whatever are you doing *here*? Why have you left the laundry-house? Kindly do not laugh at me, I can see you snickering behind your hands, the both of you! What dreadful behaviour! What are

you staring at Magdalena? Did your mother not teach you that it is impolite to stare at your superiors? Regina, what is the matter with her? Is she ill? This cannot be, the Graf needs all hands possible for the Holy Season. Magdalena, collect yourself! You must return to your work, you as well Regina. What? What? Is she fainting? This is intolerable! Regina, I give you leave to return her to her room. Put her to bed and then go to the kitchen, the *köchin* may have some turnip tops brewing. Get her well as fast as possible and then go back to work! Hurry now!’

Magdi, if I was not a well-brought up sister I would call you evil. How am I to haul you back to the room with my ankle? Remember, I am clumsy and I might drop you.

And now my arms ache

as well as

my ankle, are you happy you

naughty naughty sister,

are you

happy, oh I should

feel sorry for you, you have fainted but

you look so

pink.

Here is a blanket, but

I am not sure that you need it.

What is that is that your eye opening?

‘Is she nearby?’

‘You wench! You should know, not me!’

‘Yes, but is she nearby?’

‘Not that I can tell. And I *will not* try to find her with my soul-eye. I made a promise.’

‘Bother you, then.’

‘Do you want me to get you some turnip brew?’

‘No, no! Don’t go anywhere now. Someone might find out we are missing from our duties. Phew, how your room stinks!’

‘I cannot help that. It is plagued with the damp and mould. I have no time to clean it, and anyway, the cleansing herbs do not grow around here. You should know that as well as I. Anyway, what are we doing here then if you find it stinks so?’

‘I need to talk to you.’

‘Did you have to be so sensational about it?’

‘I did not think that you should have been working in the library. That enormous mirror in there has disturbed you, and will again. You should not go into that room. I do not like that mirror.’

‘That seems unusual for you, Magdi!’

‘Come now, this is not the time to be nasty!’

‘Very well, then say what you have to say. Then we had best be back to our work. This is what we came to Pressburg for, is it not?’

‘Ow, Regi, don’t clutch at me so! Sometimes there are things which are more important than work, especially if these things prevent one from doing one’s work and being sent home in shame.’

‘And what do you mean by that, you lazy girl?’

‘You sound just like Tante when you speak that way. Let go!’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I have been trying to address that thing that is pestering you. I know it has been bothering you since before you came here, and that you had hoped that you had left it behind you. You make awful sounds in your sleep and you always seem so nervous and frightened now. You drop things more often and fall more. But aside from that, I can sense it through you. But it will not speak to me. I cannot reach it for you. It will only speak to you, and you must speak to it before you come to greater harm. I *know* what you saw in the Graf’s mirror, but only because I can read it in your heart. That is as far as my skill can go. You know that I am not as skilled as you are.’

‘Do you know what would happen to us if someone overheard us?’

Holy Mother Holy Mother Holy Mother help me help

us

Holy Mother I am so afraid

Holy Mother I made a promise I wanted to save myself from this

nothing

and now must I

face it

to protect myself?

Holy Mother make it

go

away¹⁰

Holy Mother I cannot do

this I cannot go into

nothing

I will not! I am

not willing

to throw myself into this kind of

danger

I am not ready I will

never

be ready as Oma Rosa was to

calm myself before the

fire.

Holy Mother,

shield me from nothing!

‘Regi, why do you think I made you haul me all the way to the servants’ house in the middle of the day when everyone would be so busy? I am not as cruel or stupid as all that!’

‘But Magdi,’

¹⁰ The Holy Mother answers; ‘My child, I cannot fight your battles for you. I can dress you in your armour, but I cannot fight for you. That would take your strength.’

‘No, please! This is for your own safety. I cannot help you with this thing. You must do it yourself or it will follow you for the rest of your life. Do you want that?’

‘Magdi, if someone finds out about this, anyone, even Tante, especially Tante, I could be accused of witch -’

‘Stop! Do not even say it! Remember what Oma Rosa used to say. Be careful what you say, you might receive it! Thought begets action.’

‘I know, I know. I take my thought from the laws that cause our intention to return. I speak with a clean heart. There. Is that better?’

‘Must you be so - so - *awful*? City living is ruining you.’

‘I do not think it is the city. Although I do not enjoy the life here too much. Maybe I cannot like it because of the nothing.’

‘Is that what you call it?’

‘Yes. That is how it is. A great, dark nothing.’

‘It must not like that, being thought of as a nothing. You had better talk to it. It might stop plaguing you then. Maybe it is only bothering you because you take no notice of it. One of the students is like that with me. I ignore him and it bothers him until his ears turn red.’

‘Really, is that a suitable likening?’

‘I cannot tell you. You must find out for yourself, or it will get worse’

‘Must I? Can we not rid ourselves of it some other way?’

‘We? It is *your* nothing, not mine!’

‘Can I not wait until after Christmas, then? It seems so wrong to do this now, during the Holy Season.’

‘That is your decision, but I feel that it will become worse the longer you leave it. I would stop this bothersome spirit as soon as I possibly could.’

‘But Magdi, I just do not feel right about it. You know I made a vow.’

‘Hush! Is that someone coming in?’

‘You had better pretend to be ill, or we will both be sent home.’

‘Sssssshhhhhh. Be careful what you say now.’

*

One by one, the students are returning to the library.

I wonder

if they can bear passing that great
mirror.

I am

glad glad glad

that it is Magdi

who has to work in that room

who has to dust that

thing

and not me. I am

glad

that I can stay here in the laundry-house

away from the palace

away from that

bedroom

here in the steam and lye and

fresh-ironed cotton

it is warm here

it is

safe

here and I am alone

but not alone. Outside

the gardener is working, clearing snow

from the paths, hear him, he is

breaking off dead branches,

strewing straw

around the plants who are covered up with sacking

I have never seen such a thing before, it seems

such a good idea I wonder if it could be

used with other plants, say with

herb bushes

I wonder if it would affect their healing

properties, maybe make them stronger

or something

like

that

or if I could bring them into a warm, safe room like this

laundry

where the steam from the copper kettle keeps
everything warm
I wonder how those students keep themselves
warm
in that awful library.
Flirting with
Magdi
I bet.
She runs around with her dusting cloth and
twitches her skirts at them
I bet.
Poor fools
And I am here
safe and warm
safe and warm and alone
just with my thoughts
and the happy song of the gardener
washing washing washing
the clothes
soft and warm
water warm
alone and very
very quiet

Oh, what now? Who has come in now?

‘Regina, what are you doing there?’

‘Hello Tante. I am just minding the wash.’

‘Who told you to do that?’

‘You did. That was the first task you gave me this morning. Mind the wash.’

‘Well, you are needed elsewhere now.’

‘Who will mind the wash?’

‘Never you mind about the wash. The wash can mind itself. I need you to go to the cellar.’

‘Oh Tante! Do I have to? It is dark and cold down there.’

‘I cannot help that, that is the nature of cellars.’

‘Can you not get one of the men to go down there?’

‘The men have much more important things to do. They are all busy this morning.’

‘What about another girl? Maybe Magdi can do it? She is only dusting in the library.’

‘All the other girls are in the kitchen and have no time to go down to the cellar. You are the only one who is not working at an important task this morning.’

Why, thank you Tante.

‘Someone has to do the job, and you are the only one. Go now.’

‘What is it that I need to go into the cellar for?’

‘Potatoes and wine.’

‘But Tante, they are miles apart from each other! I will need to lamp or a taper or something.’

‘Well, I am not stupid, girl. Take a candle from your room. Go on, it needs to be done, quickly.’

Bother, bother, bother! Now I must leave this warmth. What an annoyance. How awful. I hate the cold. And I think going to fetch potatoes and wine is even *less* important than minding the wash. She has no idea about these things at all. What would she know? I hate the cellar. I hate all cellars. There! Now I am in the cold and I have no shawl and it is

cold cold cold

I hate this slush, I hate this wet cold

Go away crow, stop

laughing at me

It is not funny to have to leave the laundry house and

traipse down into the cellar,

into the pit of gloom, into the

darkness, into the

pitch black, descending under the house

into the earth it is like

death

Go away, crow stop

laughing at me

make yourself useful and find
a worm to feed yourself. Only
leave me
alone

Ugh. Look at that.

The lazy gardener has not cleared away the snow from around the cellar door.

The handle is all rusted, and I have no gloves. I suppose the hinges are all rusted as well. Bother, bother, bother. If I could just *move* the bar, but it is rusted to the catch as well. Where is the gardener? Is he anywhere around? No? Well, Regina, you will just have to do this yourself. Kick it, that might help.

Yes! I am so strong!

I can pull the door open now, I am sure of it!

Ooph! How it does stink down there! I will leave the door open and let the air in for a moment.

Holy Mother, but it is cold.

I wonder, is it colder out here or in there?

I cannot tell.

It is too cold out here. Surely

there would be a little warmth in there, under the house, in the earth, more
than out here in this cold white garden

I had better go down

into the blackness, here is a step,

go slowly, at least the steps are not

wet

although the wood feels soft and

rotten

careful, careful, one step at a time, test the wood first, and again and again and again and surely there must be an end to these steps because the darkness is almost over my head and I have no idea how far away the bottom is and it is swallowing me up and

no light!

Holy Mother I am stupid!

I forget to fetch a light.

Now what shall I do? Go back up or

try

to find the stuff without it?

I don't want to step another step down

the wood feels too

rotten I

might fall and I do not know how far down these steps go, for Heaven's sake I might

fall

into hell, who knows what is waiting at the bottom of these

steps it is so dark it is so dark it is so

dark

and

so

cold

my eyes, look, there is darkness everywhere I am surrounded by the dark and

there is no light it is as cold as

nothing

oh, how my heart beats, it is trying to choke me, the

nothing

is this what hell is?

Nothing

not even a light, not even the warmth of flames, just damp cold air and

darkness

except

that tiny spot there in front of my eyes, what is that, it grows it grows and it

glows pale white look how it stretches now, longer and longer what is this

what

do I see here what

grows before me surrounded by

nothing

surely it cannot be growing from

nothing

since everything is born from something what is this light, what is it, it is tall
and it is big and it is shaping itself into an

old

man

No, *don't*

touch me, *don't*

come near be, I do not

want

you

don't

stretch your arms out to me I

will not

go into your embrace I

will not

let you touch me, go

out

from here!

Oh, don't don't don't you are so cold and you are

dead

your fingers, they burn so, they burn like ice, I do not want to be enfolded in
your arms, I will die, I will die from the cold, leave me leave me leave me Holy

Mother, he is trying to

hold me

Help me, protect me from this

old

man

I cannot be held by this

nothing

Let me die first, let me die and get away from this thing Holy Mother let me

die

*

‘Regi, Regi. Wake up now, I have some tea for you.’

‘Mmm -’

‘Regi, please. Open your eyes. Here, smell the steam.’

‘Ow, it’s sharp.’

‘Here, sweetheart, take a sip, please, and then try and open your eyes.’

‘There, I know it is hot, let me wipe your mouth.’

‘That tastes disgusting. Why did you put nettles into my tea?’

‘Can you open your eyes?’

‘I don’t want to. I won’t. Where did you get nettles from at this time of year?’

‘I found them before the snow. I knew we would need them at some time.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Something Oma Rosa told me before - She said I would need to know this for you in your time of need.’

‘What in Heaven’s name are you talking about?’

‘Nettles. Remember? She said “Nettles, nettles are the thing to sting away bad spirits! Throw them in the fire, plant them around the house, and if worse still comes, brew it up and drink it up!”’

‘I do not know what you are talking about.’

‘Yes, you do. Will you open your eyes now?’

‘No.’

‘It stinks in here.’

‘I am sorry about that. The mould is growing worse and Tante will not give me time to clean it off.’

‘She hates me.’

‘She is just busy and concerned with the running of the house. It is a big task.’

‘She hates me. That is why she is not here, now.’

‘Regi, do not think like that.’

‘How should I think, then?’

‘Will you not open your eyes a little? I have brought you something to eat.’

‘Why should I? It is just an ugly, stinking room and there is nothing to see in here. No light.’

‘Please?’

‘No.’

‘Well let me feed you then.’

‘No, no, no.’

‘Why not? It will strengthen you.

‘Just let me lie here until I die.’

‘Regi, what is the matter with you? Are you possessed? The nightwatchman brought you in and said he never saw anyone so pale and sick before.’

‘I *am* pale. I *am* sick.’

‘Well, then, tell me what is wrong with you. You are better at healing than I. Please, darling sister, I beg you. Tell me what is the matter!’

‘How can I tell you what is wrong? I am sick.’

‘Must I remind *you* what Oma said? It was you who was always telling me!’

‘Heal thyself? How can I? I would rather die.’

‘Very well then, I will read you.’

‘Do not do that.’

‘I will. Lie still for a moment.’

‘No, stop it. Stop it stop it stop it. I will not be still until you stop it. Stop it, leave me alone, go away, it has nothing to do with you and you can just get out of here and leave me to die.’

‘Sleep now, big sister, sleep.

‘Stop stroking me.’

‘No, now don’t push my hand away. Sleep, sleep. I will sing you to sleep.

‘The Dearest Goddess

gave me

a thousand songs

at the tip

of every
wheel spoke.
Whenever
I'm sad,
all I need
to do
is turn
the wheel,
and song
flows.'
'That's nice. Keep singing.'

*

As Regina Sleeps

Whisper whisper whisper, all is quiet sisters.

Whisper whisper whisper, make no noise sisters.

Hold our hands tight, around the bed's sight.

Whisper whisper whisper, remain silent sisters.

'Why did you bring us here, Magdalena?' The Crone raises her eyebrow. Her eyes gleam, despite the dim light from the one candle in the corner of the room.

'It stinks in here,' another one complains, her voice low.

‘We’d better hurry, or the cloak charm will dwindle,’ yet another voice comments from the far side of the bed.

‘Magdalena? Speak.’ The Crone pulls her own cloak closer to her body.

Magdalena stands next to the head of the bed, holding onto Regina’s hand. ‘She won’t open her eyes, not in daylight, not to eat, and she won’t get up out of the bed. At night nothing will wake her, she sleeps as though she is dead. And she has been bothered by a bad spirit since late last summer.’

The Crone’s voice rises. ‘Eh? What spirit?’

‘SSSSHHHHHHHHH!’ the others hiss at her.

‘OUCH!’ The sound of fingers slapping cut through the damp dark.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ Magdalena mutters. ‘I’ve put nettles around the bed.’

‘Nettles?’ the Crone smiles in the dark. ‘Good thinking. You know something, then?’

‘How else would I have found you?’ Magdalena’s voice is tense. ‘Listen, I am at my wits’ end. The apothecary can do nothing for her because he can find naught wrong in her body, the priest won’t believe me, says that I am talking the nonsense of country-folk, and my Aunt who manages this household is ready to pack her off back home. I would let her, except back home they would do worse things to her than call in the priests and apothecaries. They’ve done those sort of things before, back home.’

‘Do you know how dangerous this is?’ a voice spits. ‘Not only for you and her, but for us?’

‘Of course I do!’ Magdalena stamps her foot. Regina groans, feeling her hand being gripped through her sleep. ‘But I cannot think of any other way to cure her, or

to get her courage back up. She wants to die, and she knows better than I do that she must fight this spirit herself.'

'She knows the work of the *taltos*? She is strong?' The Crone scratches her head. It is a low, oily sound.

'Much, much stronger than I. Back at home she was being taught until *they* caught up with our Wise One.'

The Crone shuffles closer to the bed, lifts her index finger to Regina's face and strokes the cold skin of her cheek. Regina twitches, but does not move away from the touch.

'Yes,' she whispers. 'So strong but so innocent of her strength. A true Maiden. She has a lot to learn, this one.'

'But she won't. She refuses to remember the lessons of the past wisdom.'

'She has been scared. She saw what they did to her teacher?'

'We both did.'

'And does she acknowledge the Mother of Creation?' one of the low voices from the corner weaves through the conversation.

'She prays to the Holy Mother constantly.'

'That is not enough,' a voice says. 'It is not enough to reduce the Mother to the virgin of men only.'

'Silence!' The Crone spits. 'It is more than enough. Better to worship a lesser Mother than no Mother at all!' She halts, stroking Regina's cheek. 'Oh, but she is strong. This is why the spirit is showing itself to her, I think. She does not know enough to protect herself and work with this thing. We had better find the pathway and see what the situation is. Sisters?'

‘What about *her*?’ despite the dark, the voice directs itself to Magdalena.

‘Have you ever done this work before?’ the Crone asks.

‘A little.’ Magdi’s voice is firm.

‘Four is not a good number for this work,’ the other voice warns.

‘But there are five of us here. That will do. Two maids, two mothers, and myself.’ The Crone’s voice is warm. ‘Our work takes us where we are needed. Do you agree?’

‘Yes,’ one whispers.

‘Yes,’ echoes the other.

‘Yes,’ says Magdi.

‘Very well, then, let us take hands. With each other and the girl.’

The four women form a ring around the bed. In the dark their silence is thick and close. Regina lies still, she does not twitch. The candle flickers out, but no-one moves. Despite the night, despite the snow outside, the air in the room warms and warms. Soon unseen drips of perspiration pour from the womens’ bodies and soak into their thick woolen clothes.

They stand together in the dark for a very, very long time.

It is still dark, though, when the Crone stirs and begins a susurrations with her breath. Soon the others stir, although Magdalena stands as though she sleeps. The Crone breaks the circle of hands and places her hands on the girl’s head. In a few moments Magdalena opens her eyes and sucks in her breath.

‘It is almost dawn,’ the Crone says. ‘I think our work here is done.’

‘We had better leave before our cloak disappears,’ one of the voices cracks.

‘What . . . what . . .’ Magdalena’s voice is dry and breathless.

The Crone chuckles. 'You will learn soon. Drink much water today, and eat meat if you can. Otherwise, do not be surprised if you feel tired or over-exerted today. Sisters, we had better leave.'

There is the sound of flapping cloth, and Magdalena leads the way from the bed, through her room and to the corridor. Dawn is not yet grey, but the light is different already. She leads the three women through the servant's house, out of the door and through a small door in the wall of the grounds that leads to the forest. After they have passed, Magdalena stands in the doorway for a while and watches after them. Dazed, her glance travels between each one although they all part and move different ways. After a while she notices that she has lost sight of each one. As she moves back through the garden, she does not notice the sets of footprints that stamp the snow. She wanders through the white garden, oblivious to the twinkle of candle light in the nightwatchman's post, back through the house and to her bed.

Dawn glimmers, and with it a medium snow fall that covers the tracks left in the garden.

*

Regina's soul journeys¹¹

¹¹ And as I lay in my cold bed in that cold cold bedroom, with the smell of mould infiltrating my nose and my breath as I lay there staring into the depths of that dark ceiling where in the corners *things* lurked that I could not see, I felt myself being swept up by an almighty Hand with a swift wind that cleansed my nose of those foul, musty smells, that swept away the cobwebs and the darkness and I found myself standing on a river bank. But such a river as I have never seen before, clean and blue, clean and green, sparkling with a light that was brighter than the sun's reflection, that seemed to come from the water itself, and I found that I was naked and unashamed, and that the skin of my body was soft and round, soft and pink, there were no sharp bones or blue bruises. I walked into the river, I walked into the river and found myself deep under the water and I could breathe, I could breathe underneath this water because it was not water but love. I was floating in love. Love filled the openings of my body like water, and everywhere I cast my look this love transformed into golden light and the

*

Because she no longer knew what to do, she went to a Franciscan monk of the strictest observance, to beg for advice. He gave this counsel; that when the spirit manifested, she might like to say as protection the words of the psalm 150: 'Every spirit praises the Lord'.

She complied with this advice, and at the next nightly manifestation the spirit began with the retort, 'I praise Him as well!'. This was the beginning of his speech, and of their further conversations.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p97

It is slow, it is so so

slow

this slipping between one warm, warm place

and the next.

Light, half light,

light was filling me filling me and I was safe and healed. And when I could see that I was no longer flesh but light and water and love, a great hand reached under the water to me and pulled me out and I broke through the surface of the liquid light and love and stood once more on the riverbank facing the forest. And out of the forest stepped the Holy Mother, only She was not a maiden, She was a warrior, armed with a spear and clothed in chain mail and Her hair was bound back and uncovered. And as I was naked She gave me a garment to wear, soft as silk, whiter than mountain snow, lighter than the finest silk and warmer than lamb's wool. And as I was clad in this garment it changed, it changed into mail, but the mail of the Holy Warrior Mother, the One Who Protects Her Children, mail that filled me with light and strength and confidence. She said to me, 'My sister, you are protected by My love. You are free to walk out into your world and know that you have the strength to do so.' And then in a shimmer She was gone and I felt that the garment was folding around me, another skin, a different flesh that could sustain me through anything, any horror that I would have to face when I was away from this place, this forest, this river, this healing land. And I wanted to enter the river once more, because I did not want to leave this place I wanted to enter again and stay there forever, dressed in this white cloth and finding myself beautiful. And I knelt down on the riverbank and looked once more into the water, and there where my reflection should have been I found that I was looking down on myself lying on my bed, my cold, damp, mouldy bed, with the door to that room shut against the world, with little light and one stump of a candle and I knew that I must return.

light
and the eyes open for a moment, a
heartbeat
then close again to try and find that
beautiful land
again
and on the threshold
hover hover, trying to enter to
return
beautiful warm land dark and
pink
and then the intrusion of the morning light that
cuts through the colour behind the eyelids
the warm blindness of the outside, the
other land, the threshold
behind the eyelids that quiver
from one moment to the
other

it is heavy, it is so so
heavy
the raising of the eyelids, not wanting
to leave
the otherworlds, the

outside that is
inside the head and the heart and the
body
the dream that comes from within
the body but is so faraway, so
someplace else

there

but then the light intrudes, invades, and
the attention slips away from inside and
turn
outside
again, outside and the head is still thick with sleep
sleep as if the soul has not been wandering
sleep as if the body is dead, slow, slow, where is the soul
when the body
sleeps?

I will close my eyes again.

I will return to my dream

my dream, what was it?

Where is it, my dream?

Let me cover my head with the blankets, let me

crawl

back into my dream for I feel

warm and

heavy

my body is

bliss, sweet, heavy I

do not want to move

I

feel

good

And then the light pale

pale cold and high up -

it must be morning, the light is so

potent it crawls down the wall

from the high little window and pierces through my eyelids and irritates my
eyes and pierces my head, I am so head-heavy I will not open my eyes but then the
light hurts them. Yet

yet

it is time to

open

my eyes.

MMMMmmmmmm now

stretch the arms;

one side, one

side, then

the other that feels

good

but something hurts something is not right I had better stand up and see what it

is and

oh!

‘What was that? Regi? Is that you? Holy Mother, Regi, was that you at last?’

‘Magdi? Magdi, I cannot seem to stand up. Can you help me? I can’t open the door for you. I am on the floor. Why are you crying?’

‘For Heaven’s sake, my sister! You are awake! Your eyes are open!’

‘Of course, how else am I to see?’

‘I am glad! Now I can tell Tante to stop packing your bags. She has been going to pack them for the past three weeks. I knew, I *knew* my sp - . . .’

‘Regi, what have you done?’

‘Nothing. I have been praying for you.’

I

will

not

ask her.

‘Help me up. I must dress and go to the priest for advice before I begin my work.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I have decided. I need help. I will ask a priest for advice. Someone who knows about these things should be able to help me.’

‘Whatever made you decide to do *that*?’

‘I had a dream. And I feel so much stronger this morning. If only I knew what to do, then I could make it go away.’

‘I could help you, you realize that.’

‘No, Magdi. There is no room here for the ways of the forest people. This is a different type of thing entirely.’

‘What makes you think I cannot help you, Regi?’

‘Because this is no time for the tricks of the head. This goes much further, and much deeper and is much stronger than what you and I know. I must go to a priest. Before anyone other than I is hurt.’

‘Onkel told me something the other day.’

‘No time, Magdi. I must go to the priest before work begins.’

‘Don’t brush me aside! You must hear this. Listen. Onkel *heard* your thing.’

‘What did you say?’

‘What is it? Are your legs weak? Do you need water?’

‘Just repeat to me what you just said.’

‘Onkel heard your thing. Quite some time ago. Before the Holy Season. One night before midnight he was on his way back in after talking to the nightwatchman

and he heard an terrible noise in the garden. He said he couldn't imagine what it was, except that he heard a door being hurled shut many times over. Then he said that even though he did not believe in such superstitious things, he knew that he was near the presence of something unGodly. He does not want to tell Tante. He is afraid.'

'All the more reason that I must go.'

'Let me come with you, then.'

'No, I must go alone. You must remain here in case someone asks why I am gone. Tell them that I have gone to confess my laziness, or something like that.'

'Regi? Regi, don't you want to take a shawl? It is cold out there!'

Here in the street, it is

grey.

I wonder what will make my legs work faster, they are

so slow

today, so

weak and timid. I must, I must

finish this task, I must

rid myself of this *nothing*

and now I also must take it away from

my family, my poor Onkel,

so simple a man, he does not deserve

to become caught up in this thing.

It would be best

if no-one knew about this *nothing*

at all

and then maybe I could

enchant it away

all by

myself.

I wonder

should I go at all? Should I

turn around this very moment and go straight back to work straight back to the warmth of the laundry room straight back and tell them that I am nothing but a lazy-good-for-nothing slattern and that I am simply telling lies to get out of my work and that they should send me back home so that I may repent of my ill-nature? Perhaps I have been

dreaming

everything.

Everything.

Perhaps I am mad, as father

thought.

Perhaps I should better go

away

somewhere, take the

nothing

with me and disappear

instead of

wasting time

like this.

I do not

deserve

attention

if I am mad, or

dreaming.

Here is the church.

Do I enter?

Look, there is someone at the door. It is a

monk, look, his feet must be

very cold, perhaps he has not seen me, perhaps I might just walk away so slowly and

quietly that he will not notice me, perhaps I will just melt away like the slush here and

‘May I help you?’

‘Oh, oh, Brother. I did not notice you there!’

‘Have you come for something? Are you a messenger?’

‘No, no. Brother, I . . .’

‘Is there something bothering you, child? It is unusual to see a maid out on a morning like this.’

‘Aahh, well,’

‘Have you come for a confession? Is your conscience troubling you?’

‘Oh dear. I am not sure at all what . . .’

‘Perhaps it is better if you come into the Lord’s house and unburden yourself at confession. You seem in a most unusual state. Follow me, please.’

Holy Mother, am I doing the right thing?¹²

‘Come my child. Do want to enter the confessional or shall we just sit here before God’s altar?’

‘Erm, I would rather sit here by this statue.’

‘The Holy Mother? Well then, why not? It is calm here. There are many devoted ones who like to contemplate here. What is troubling you, Miss?’

‘I am plagued, but I am not sure that you will understand me, or even believe me.’

‘I know a little of the things that plague young maids’ hearts. I have heard many confessions. Your confidence is in me.’

‘Ah, Brother, this is not really a matter of the heart.’

‘No? That is usual in young girls such as yourself.’

‘Maybe so, but . . . well . . . This is difficult for me, please lend me your patience. You see I am . . .’

‘You are - ? Let God strengthen you. Unburden yourself and God will forgive you your transgressions.’

‘Well, I am not so sure I have been transgressing, except maybe from time to time I lose faith and trust because of the fear.’

¹² The Holy Mother answers; ‘Everything comes to you when it is most needed.’

‘My child, that is a terrible thing. What awful fear is in you that makes you lose yourself this way?’

‘Aahh, um, I, well.’

‘I am listening child. It is not I who judges you. You are safe here in God’s house.’

‘Brother, well, oh this is difficult.’

‘Brother-I-am-being-vexed-by-a-malicious-spirit-who-comes-at-night-and-frightens-me-and-will-not-leave-me-alone-and-the-last-time-it-happened-I-fell-down-the-cellar-stairs-and-was-cowering-in-my-bed-for-three-weeks-because-I-was-so-afraid-instead-of-attending-to-my-duties-as-I-should!’

‘Oh!’

‘Yes.’

‘Ahem! Yes, that is unusual! Well, well, well. Let me think a moment.’

He has closed his eyes. He
does not
believe
me.

‘Are you *sure* this is an evil spirit?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Are you not just *fancying* that there is something when it might be your fear that is deceiving you?’

‘I am not sure I understand.’

‘My child, the Scriptures teach us that the devil comes to all of us, and in many guises, to tempt us from our duties. However, when we stop to reflect a moment, we can notice that the devil does not always come to so many of us, at least not to those of us who are humble and servile. There has been quite some debate about this matter, or at least there was when I was younger.’

‘What is it that you are saying?’

‘My child, why would the devil come to you?’

Is he saying that the devil would not tempt

a laundry-maid?

Is there no

use

which the devil

has

for me?

‘I see that you are having trouble understanding my words.’

‘No, no. I just cannot see what that has to do with this thing that is bothering me.’

‘You are convinced that there is something?’

‘Yes, Brother. Otherwise I would not be here in Church telling this to you by our Holy Mother. I am not so impious as to come here telling falsehoods.’

‘Well, well, well. I myself have never thought that I would be tested so. Let me pray for a moment.’

He turns, he turns

away from me and

faces the altar.

I sit here, Holy Mother,

and watch Your face.

Holy Mother,

send him an answer.

Let him be able to help me for

I am at my wits’

end. And now Onkel says he hears it too, and Magdi,

she

knows

something.

This situation is

awful

indeed and it could only get

worse.

Mother, I need your help,

please please

help

me Your

daughter, Your

child, I cannot

go on anymore.

Look, look. The Brother

turn

back to me, there is a light

in his eyes. He

believes

me I think he

believes me.

‘God has spoken to me, my child. Listen well. Do you know the last Psalm?’

‘No, Brother. Not that one.’

He stands, he

faces

the altar.

I cannot

hear

him

‘Praise the Lord in His sanctuary,

‘Praise him in the firmament of His strength,

‘Praise Him for His might deeds,

‘Praise him for his sovereign majesty.

‘Praise him with the blast of the trumpet,

‘Praise him with lyre and harp,

‘Praise him with timbrel and dance,

‘Praise him with strings and pipe.

‘Praise him with sounding cymbals, praise him with clanging cymbals.

‘Let everything that has breath

‘Praise the Lord! Alleluia.’

‘Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Let every Spirit praise the Lord!’

‘Do you understand now, child?’

‘Yes. Yes I do. Will this protect me from it?’

‘God has spoken to us. This will help. Go now, and sin no more. You are shriven.’

‘Bless me Father. Thank you, Holy Mother, as well.’

‘God go with you.’

*

Regina waits

Now.

Now you can

come

to me, you

nothing

you

no

thing.

Now you can try to make me fear

again,

and I

will not

I will not fear you anymore.

Now I have strength

behind me,

before me,

at my side.

Listen, the church bells are ringing -

ten

ten and three quarters

Come, then,

nothing

come to meet me.

Come and try

to frighten me

I am not

so easily afearred now.

This is silence. This is

thickness

Holy Mother, You are

with me here.

Wrap your arms around me and

help me face this darkness

with me

together

we will be strong, so strong.

There - is that

it?

Are you here,

nothing?

Or am I haunting my own

mind, as I would when I was a child and they told me stories of

the *polednice*, the

ghost of midday, stealing children away from their mothers.

I was never frightened

I always wanted to meet her, the White Lady of

Noon.

A sun spirit, how can a sun spirit be

evil?

Oh, I am

cold. I shall not think of the

sun, it is almost

time, it

must

be almost time, it must

be near.

Come, then, spirit of *nothing*

come to me. What is it that you want?

Who is that?

Who is that breathing in my room?

Is that you,

nothing?

I can

feel

you. I can feel you I can feel you, and look there it is, the space, the horrible
horrible emptiness, it is there, yes, there you are you damned thing, look at you, old
man, sitting on the edge of my bed what do you want from me what do you want from
me, don't

don't

touch me, don't come close to me oh Holy Mother help me remember what it was the priest said, that was so long ago and I didn't hear him and now I can't remember what he said, Holy Mother, put the words into my brain because I am afraid, look, look how it reached out to

don't

touch me! I am cold enough without you swallowing me whole into you blackness get away get away get away get away

EVERY SPIRIT PRAISES THE LORD!

{‘But I praise Him as well!’}

‘Regi? Regi, why are you shouting? What are you staring at? Regi? What is the matter with you? Are you going to go blind against me again? No? What if I shine the candle into your eyes? Look, she is not blinking! Regi, *Regi!* Why don't you answer me? You will wake up all the servants if you scream!’

[The church bells chime midnight]

‘Magdi? What are you doing in here?’

‘You were screaming something about spirits. It woke me. I just wanted to keep you quiet so you didn't wake up the household. Is it back?’

‘Oh, I am so hot.’

‘But it is so cold in here!’

‘Magdi, did you see it?’

‘No. Let me get under the covers with you, I am too cold.’

‘Come. Are you sure you did not see it?’

‘No. But I saw you seeing it. What happened? Are you afraid?’

‘It - it spoke to me.’

*

Through the hope that she would soon be relieved of his presence, she gathered her courage and asked him what he wanted

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p98

‘But are you afraid? That is what I am asking!’

‘I cannot tell you. I do not know, anymore, if I am afraid. Now that it talks.’

Now that it

speaks now that it

speaks, it talks it

can tell me things, it can show me

things

things that I have only ever heard whispered, things that not even Oma Rosa would tell me, things that Regi might toy with if she ever heard of them things that could make me very very

powerful

this nothing, this is no longer

nothing

but it is very

dark.

I should light another candle I would like some more

light

by which to see my way

although I am not very much

afraid

anymore

the fear is going away, rippling and waving away from me, a stone dropped
into this pond of *nothing* and dissipating, so many wavelets that sink back into their
water, their

deep deep water,

for who can say how deep a pond is

when the surface is covered with scum, and the wind

does not blow the water about?

I wonder, I

wonder what it would tell me if I asked?

Would it make me fear it

more?

Or

would it tell me the secrets of heaven and hell, would it go into the hearts of
others and tell me their secrets, would it tell me this and

would I

want

to know?

Oh, this is

evil

would that I was still afraid of the

nothing

for then I might not entertain these thoughts.

These are thoughts that

hurt

Oma Rosa -

these are the thoughts that poisoned the men against her, these are the wicked

wicked

things that they whispered in their taverns about her

this is

a contagion

this is wicked

but I am still thinking these

thoughts

Am I tainted?

Holy Mother, help me - can I be so
defiled?

I, who have only ever thought to be happy, to be
at peace, to be near You,
Mother,
can I really be thinking these dark
reflections?

Holy Mother, help me¹³

I dare not call it again to my side,
lest it should leave me with this rancid
taint clinging to my soul

‘Regi? Regi!’

‘What, what is it?’

‘I know some people who could help you.’

‘Who? What are you talking about?’

‘I know some . . . cunning women.’

Oh my God, what is she getting herself into?

¹³ The Holy Mother answers; ‘If that which you seek you find not within you, you will never find it without you.’

‘What have you done, Magdi?’

‘Nothing. *Nothing!* Even in this light, you don’t have to look at me like that! I was lonely when I first came here, so I . . . sought out some people who reminded me of home.’

‘Magdi, do not tell me such wicked lies. How can there be cunning women in a big city?’

‘There just are. Many of them.’

‘I do not believe you. Cunning women wouldn’t be found in the city. There are not the herbs needed here, nor the space enough to view the stars, and for another thing, there are too many people to be able to concentrate on . . . well, you know what I mean! You are a wicked girl, telling me such stories.’

‘Don’t you *dare* call *me* wicked! I know you what you were thinking just now! You were thinking you could evoke this thing and ask it to give you power over. . .’

‘Just shut your mouth, you big liar! How dare you read me when I am so vulnerable! You are just making it up to make me seem like something awful.’

‘It is the truth, though, is it not?’

‘Well. I justified myself.’

‘You still held *those* thoughts first. And you know better that I do that action follows thought.’

‘Sometimes I wish I never even *had* a sister!’

‘Regi, how could you say such a thing?’

‘Regi, that really pained me to hear.’

‘Well how would you like it if I read you all the time and called you up short for every little thing that you felt? It is like God watching over me constantly and handing me over for judgement every moment of the day!’

‘Someone must look after you. You are in enough trouble as it is, you know.’

‘And just what do you mean by that?’

‘I mean, Onkel has told Tante that he heard something strange. Tante took it, as she would, that he heard something devilish. She put three and five together to make four and now thinks that either you are I practicing something not altogether Christian.’

‘And how would she turn the blame to us?’

‘Regi, she knows about Oma Rosa.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yes. Oh.’

‘Well, then, what does this have to do with those cunning women that you think exist in this city? If Tante thinks we are doing the devil’s work, why should we have anything to do with them?’

‘Because you and I both know it is the only way to rid us of your *thing*.’

‘What of prayer? What of the way of priests?’

‘Did the advice given do its task?’

‘I do not think so. It spoke to me, and I think if I summon it, it will speak again.’

‘So then, in truth, it made matters worse.’

‘It could be told that way, yes.’

My, she is a clever one! She speaks with as much twisting as a man of logic.

‘Do you not at least wish to try what I suggest?’

‘But I do not believe that such people exist. It is not possible.’

‘Remember what Oma Rosa would tell us. Sometimes it is necessary not to trust the world as it is given to you by another.’

‘I still do not understand what that means.’

‘Please, Regi. I truly have no doubt that they will help you.’

‘Let me think about it.’

*

Sudicky: Devana, Mokoš a Morana

There is a dark dwelling on the outskirts of the city of Pressburg. The two sisters, Regina and Magdalena, arrive there by foot after having trudged through the streets and the lanes of the scrubby forest. It is approaching dusk, and Regina is cursing herself for allowing herself to be taken on this wild walk, particularly since there seems to be no hope of return before utter darkness. Slush covers most of the ground, and she is also unimpressed with the repair of her shoes. She hobbles along, balancing on the front of her feet so that she will not break her loose heel again. Magdalena runs ahead, stopping every few paces to see if her sister follows, urging her on with the flapping of her home-made sheep skin cloak. Above them, a pair of ravens have been following their path. Both Regina and Magdalena have noticed the

glossy black bodies, but they do not mention this observation to the other. Neither one is particularly bothered by the thick, sleek birds.

The hut is small, with no windows, and seems to have sprung up out of the earth. It is squat, and twigs and mud cling to its sides and roof, a giant nest, or burrow, or lair. There is a door in the middle of the shaggy wall, made of thick young boughs that are black with winter moisture. Magdalena knocks on this door, and Regina hears a muffled rhythm, a song beating out on the swollen wood. She wonders if it is a secret rhythm, but then decides to stop thinking. Thinking will only lead her mind to fearful places. In the matter at hand, she wants to be as unfettered by anxiety as possible. The door swings open to them, Regina takes her hand and grips it, and the two sisters are swallowed by the hut that is growing from the floor of the forest.

Inside it is not as dark as expected. The sisters find that there is no need to adjust their eyes to the dim light, and that the candle that flutters with the wind of the open door seems brighter than it should be. The walls appear smooth and as white as possible for such a dwelling. There is no furniture but a bench that follows the wall around its circumference, its wood, too, unusually polished and smooth and inviting.

‘Welcome, sisters,’ a voice whispers from somewhere in the room. ‘What is it that you seek?’

Regina swings around to face a figure sitting on the bench, a quiet, dark figure that does not seem to move at all. As if they come from the air, she notices two other figures as well, sitting dark and still along the bench. She holds her breath for a moment, and with her exhalation, she notices a calmness creep into her body, a certain depth of tranquility that she can remember feeling a long time ago. Only, she measures this length not in time but in experience, as if it is not the flowing of

moment to moment that has separated her from the calm, but rather a wall of emotion, a thick layer of bricks of fear that disconnects her from peace. In a heartbeat her painful memories are forgotten, and images of the forest and dappled sunlight playing across her face surface. She smiles, and Magdalena is surprised by the return of beauty to her sister's pale face. Magdalena's heart stops beating as hard as it has been up until now.

The figure on the left speaks. 'Beautiful children, it is difficult to let the walls down, more difficult still to keep them down in the world outside. But never let there be walls between us here in this room.' It is as though all three figures are covered by gossamer-light grey veils, and yet both Regina and Magdalena can see their faces, see the skin of their hands, see the plain, serviceable cloth that covers their bodies. Regina feels that she can see the gossamer veils rise and fall with each breath from each woman.

For it is to three women that Magdalena has brought her, of three different ages. One young, golden haired, slender and high-breasted; the second whose rich dark hair spills over her heavy, engorged breasts and quickening belly; the third whose white hair is brittle and whose hands are gnarled and liver-spotted, and whose back is bent. Outside a crow calls to its mate, and Regina closes her eyes, listening to its music. 'What do you have to say to me, crow?' she whispers. 'Speak to me.'

The young woman giggles, a melodious rivulet of sound that insinuates itself around the stark walls. 'It tells us many things about you, but most of all that you are strong and wise in our ways,' she laughs. 'It tells us it has better things to think about than the worries of two human girls. It seeks its mate, and passes on.'

‘Do you not think that we might also know what the crow seeks?’ the dark-haired woman whispers.

Regina smiles.

‘Eh, but she is so young, so green,’ the crone says. ‘ She still finds it more important to hear it from without then from within. She is strong, but has not come that far along the paths.’ She slaps her thigh.

‘Oh but Morana,’ the young one says. ‘We have all passed along that way. It is only one part of the road and soon moved across.’

‘And you crossed it so quickly, my dear one. Not all have the luxury of running through it. Certainly not this one. She has a hard road to travel. She has come far, but must go further still.’

The dark haired woman opens her mouth; ‘Dearest Goddess,’ sings her voice

‘if you are

going to meet

the Unwelcome Goddess,

why not meet her

on the bridge?

I will walk by

and push

the Unwelcome Goddess

into

the river.’

Magdalena pales. Her breath comes a little faster, and she places her hand over her stomach. ‘Why don’t you sit down, child? Devana, get her some water,’ the dark

haired woman pats the bench next to her. The young one moves into a shadow and returns with a clay beaker in her hand. A dog appears from under the bench's darkness, nosing Magdalena's hand, insinuating its rough head into her lap as she tries to drink. A little water spills onto her skirt and the dog laps it up, stealing a lick from her trembling hand as it drinks.

'Just sit, little one,' the old woman says. 'There is no need to be so fearful. Your sister is wise, and knows that we are not what we seem,'

'And certainly not what they say we are!' The golden haired one's voice is loud, and the sound vibrates through the room.

Regina continues smiling.

'Is there something that you wish to ask us?' the dark haired woman says. She is stroking her round belly.

'Why do you ask when you can read my heart?' Regina begins stroking her own flat stomach, although she is not aware of her movements.

'It is true, we read, but it is not for us to offer advice where it is not welcome.'

'Ah yes, Mokoš, that is true. So very true these days.' The old one mutters as she begins swaying her head from side to side.

Regina shivers. The movement seems to leave her body and spread a ripple through the room.

'That was not very nice,' the golden girl says.

'My dear Devana,' the dark woman turns to her. '*Life* is not always very nice. You are wise beyond your years, but you too must learn, even as I must learn and even as Morana must continue learning. It never stops, for the world is always dying

and being reborn. You must learn from everything, dark and light. Now we are learning something dark, but without the dark one can never learn the light. Give,

Dearest Goddess

what is

to be given.

I'll take

what is

to be taken

with both hands

without hesitation.'

She sings.

The ripple subsides a little, but all in the room can feel it still lurking in the shadows. The dog whines.

'I have been so sorely frightened,' Regina begins.

'We know,' the old one replies.

'Let her speak,' the dark one pats the old one's knee.

'I have been bothered by an unclean spirit. It has hurt me, and I am afraid that it will hurt me more. It has led me to awful thoughts. It has made me ill, so ill that I cannot perform my duties in the household where I work. If I lose this work, I must go home in shame to my father, who already believes that I am bewitched. I am afraid that something bad will come of this. I have been to the holy men to seek advice but I do not think that it did any good, for the spirit returns and mocks me. I am so afraid, but the fear is like the roots of an old tree. It takes a hold deep in my heart and pushes out more and more rootlets to grow in my heart's earth.' She stops.

The gossamer of the three women shimmer with their breath. The silence grows. Regina can feel it pressing on her.

‘There is more,’ she whispers after a moment when her heart has lost its rhythm. The three women nod.

‘It is making me question my faith in the Holy Mother.’

There is another terrible silence.

The young one’s mouth opens. ‘You speak from the depths of your heart. The Holy Mother replies; listen well to Her. Faith is not measured by the human head, which turns everything that enters it upside down many times over - a ploughed field is the head. Faith is not measured by the human heart, for that is inconsistent and changes as do the seasons, many times over, and for always. Faith is not measured by human kind at all, my child, my dear child. No woman or man can capture faith and hold it in the body, which is a mere vessel. The soul reaches ever toward Me, uncontained. Do not doubt yourself. For you do not doubt Me, only your earthly body, which is ruled by your head. I am ever with you, even if you cannot reach me. As to your problem, We see nothing in it that should fear you so very greatly - you have made this fear yourself. In human terms it is simple. Approach it as you would another person, for it is no great spirit of wisdom.’ Her jaws snap shut, and her head falls forward. She breathes heavily, as though asleep, and after a moment or two she lifts her head, opens her eyes and yawns. She sighs. ‘Here I am,’ she says, smiling.

Regina clenches and unclenches her fists. ‘But what does it *mean*?’ she sobs. There are tears pouring down her face.

The dark woman and the old woman look at each other.

Magdalena clears her throat. 'Maybe you should *ask* it what it wants.' Her voice is shrill.

The blond girl coughs. 'May I have the water, please?'

The dark woman takes the beaker from Magdalena's hand and passes it to the girl.

'Is that what I should do? Is it? How can I ask *it*? I am so . . .'

The coughing drowns out the sound of Regina's tearful questions. The dark woman embraces the young one, the old one pulls the shawl from her shoulders and drapes it over the girl. Magdalena stands. 'This is awful,' she says. 'We should leave.' She takes Regina's hand and pulls her to the door. 'Thank you, thank you Sudicky,' she says over her shoulder.

'Wait, *wait*!' Regina hisses. She addresses the three women who have huddled close together on the bench. The dark woman is stroking the young one's face. 'It is always so hard for her,' she mutters. 'We should spare her more.'

'It is the work of the Goddess,' the old one replies. 'She must learn to grow strong with it. We must teach her.'

'What should I *do*?' Regina cries.

The young girl's breathe rasps. 'Why, ask it what it wants!' She nuzzles closer into the embrace of the other two.

Regina's mouth falls open.

Magdalena pulls her to the door by the hand, and then outside. Together they run back towards the heart of Pressburg. A few metres into their flight, Regina turns to look back, but she cannot see the little hut amongst the bare trees and darkening light.

*

Through the hope that she would soon be relieved of his presence, she gathered her courage and asked him what he wanted.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p98

Holy Mother be with me

Holy Mother give me strength

Holy Mother, perhaps better if

I do not ask for this

Better let this cup this

deep well of fear

pass over me

Holy Mother, I will not

do this

But the room shimmers and Regina feels a paralysis creep over her. Her spine is rigid, her muscles cold and tense, her arms, legs and neck unable to move. She can smell, however, the thick stench of mould combined with the rotting garlic that lies in the pantry by her room. There is no light in the room this night, but a certain orange glow penetrates the darkness, and she cannot close her eyes against it. She tries, she

tries to breath slowly, to relax her body, to count her heartbeats, but the now-familiar anxiety refuses her flesh and bones and nerves the luxury of peace.

Holy Mother Holy Mother Holy Mother

she chants in a time that quickens with her heart.

Oh Holy Mother, don't let him come tonight,

don't

let him touch me, don't

let him come near me, make him

forget me and get him

behind me, away

from me,

Holy Mother, give me peace, give me

faith

with myself, let me

alone let me be

strong

The shimmer grows and grows until it flickers a dark light in the centre of the room, flitting down lightly to the edge of Regina's bed. She tries, but she cannot sit up. Her body refuses her this defence. Her eyes, though, her eyes can see the shimmer take blend and merge and stretch and take form. Her eyes follow the primitive shadow

of head, trunk, arms, but little else. Her eyes follow the line of the arm reach out and touch her.

No,

NO!

Do NOT touch me,

old man!

Every Spirit praises the Lord!

Every Spirit melts before the Holy Mother!

Get away from me, get away!

Unclean spirit, foul thing!

Get back to hell where you belong!

{‘Little girl, do not condemn me to hell, for I am already there!}

Holy Mother, it speaks! This

nothing

speaks - it

touches me and it

speaks! How can you give me this

indignity!

Get off, get away, get

off!

There is a great silence. The vague glimmering form just sits at the end of Regina's bed.

It takes only the blink of an eye. Regina finds that she can avert her gaze, and she expels a breath with a great shudder.

Holy Mother, thank you.

She finds her centre. She sits up, her body loosened. She looks at the thing waiting for her at the end of her bed, and it seems to her that the face turns towards her, its eyebrows raised, the glow taking on the form and substance of the slack, smooth skin of an old, old man.

{‘Well, child? You’ve been stupidly long about it. If only you knew my troubles. If only you knew what it is like for me, but in time you too will know. Oh, life passes so quickly, all the troubles I have, you know nothing, you silly girl, you know so little, you are so stupid in these matters -’}

Inside Regina there is a sudden rush. A burning flash passes through her, leaving her ears hot, her stomach clenched, her blood pulsing.

‘What in heaven’s name do you *want*?’ she roars into the silence.

The shadow eyebrows raise further. Between the waves of rage, Regina feels the need to giggle. Her fists clench and unclench, but inside her chest there is a bubble of nasty laughter waiting to be released.

{‘I? I? I am not making a silly fuss. I am sitting here patiently, so very patiently. You could show some manners, young lady. I will not talk to you until you approach me with the appropriate demeanour. Your breeding is certainly showing itself to be inadequate.’}

Regina’s laughter escapes her.

{‘I don’t want anything. I will not talk to you unless you behave like a proper young lady.’}

Regina feels the hair raise on the back of her neck. She smirks, but stifles her laughter.

Holy Mother, give me patience. This *nothing* is just like my father.

‘Very well then. *Sir*.’ Regina grits her teeth. ‘May I ask you why you are showing yourself to me?’

{‘You might ask. I might choose not to tell you.’}

‘Then perhaps, *sir*, you might do me the kindness of leaving me alone?’

{‘I cannot. You must help me.’}

Regina sighs. She has the sudden feeling that if she were at home amongst her mother’s chickens, she would take one and wring its neck. ‘How may I help you then?’

{‘I will not proceed until you introduce yourself to me.’}

Holy Mother, give me patience, give me strength!

‘My name,’ she says, ‘is Regina Fischer. I am a laundry maid in the household of the Graf Paul Pálffy von Erdöd. Now can you tell me why you are bother - . . . showing yourself to me?’

{‘I am not impressed with you, but since I am here I may as well explain myself. I am in torment. In God’s will, go to my wife; she will give you money, a great deal of money that I have hanging over my head. Take the money and make a carving with it, a carving of the Holy Mother. Take this carving and put it in the greatest church in the city. As well as this, make them say three Holy Masses for me, have them light twelve - no more and more less - blessed candles for me, and give the rest of the money to the poor. This is to fulfill a vow I made in your world.’}

Holy Mother, what is this? What have you sent me?

‘Look, *sir*, I do not understand. Why are you sending me to your wife? Why do you not go to her yourself? Why are you frightening me so much? What right have you to do this to me?’

The shimmer shivers. Regina shrinks back; she had the same feeling as though she is about to be struck.

{‘*I cannot talk to my wife!*’}

Regina begins to feel dizzy, the air around her grows thick and heady, the blackness of the night grows and grows. Regina loses her breath, just before she

passes from consciousness, she notices that the shimmering thing at the end of her bed has disappeared.

*

The two sisters are sitting on Regina's bed in the dark. A candle is burning, but the light it gives is very faint and cannot penetrate the thick darkness of the night and of the damp and stinking room.

'Regi, I am scared. Why do you want me to do this? It is not something you should ask of your sister!'

'Magdi, there is nothing to be afraid of. I've told you it is a silly spirit. It seems lost and forlorn. I want to question it further. It dodders, like the old men in the village. Surely you remember them?'

'Yes, but I never liked them. They always wanted to touch me and pat my cheeks and kiss me. Oh, they were awful!'

Regina reaches out and pats her sister's hand. 'Do not be afraid. I only want you to keep your eyes open and your soul open and *see* this thing.'

'What if I can't?'

'Then at least keep a look out for Stephan, so that we do not disturb his watch.'

'Oh Stephan! What will he think if he finds us?'

'I do not know and at present I have no concern for him. I simply do not wish to be disturbed. I need to question this spirit more.'

'By the Holy Mother, Regi, I think you are mad!'

‘Dear Magdi, don’t. Just let me get on with the work.’

Magdalena crosses her arms and bounces up and down on the bed, sitting back so that she can listen for the footsteps of the nightwatchman. A small snarl escapes from the back of her throat.

‘Sssshhhhh,’ whispers Regina drowsily. Her limbs are already becoming heavy. Soon her breathing has become deep and slow. Magdalena knows by the sound of the air moving through her lungs that her body is stilled and her soul is elsewhere. It is a state that she never really has had the patience to achieve. A small sound alerts her to the circuit of the nightwatchman, his steps crunching over the flagstones somewhere in the courtyard below. But the sounds pass, and Magdi peers through the dark to see if she can discern anything happening.

She feels indolent, lulled by the rhythm of her sister’s deep breathing and the still air in the room. After a few moments the scratching of Regina’s fingers on the bedsheets disturb her, but since she cannot see anything she allows herself to be lulled by the night once again. In a few more moments she is asleep and dreaming that she is dusting the handsome young students who are reading in the Graf’s library. She is naked and feels a great heat envelope her, hotter than she has ever encountered before.

The heat is unbearable and in her dream the students are burning her arms with their styluses, which they are flourishing before her like great burning logs. A spark flies from one and burns into her arm. She hears a screaming which cannot stop, and with a great heave she finds herself awake in the dark bedroom, listening to the screams of her sister and to the approaching footsteps of the nightwatchman.

‘What, what, what,’ she babbles as the door is wrenched open and a lamp illuminates the little room. Stephan enters, shaking with concern.

Regina is sitting up in the bed, holding her arm. There are tears coursing down her cheeks. When she sees the burly man, she takes the bedclothes and pulls them up to her chin. Magdalena pulls her night dress down, which has crawled up to her thighs during her sleep.

‘What is going on?’ Stephan asks, swinging the lantern around.

‘Nothing, nothing,’ Regina stammers. ‘Just a nightmare.’

‘What is that terrible stench?’ He shines the light right into Regina’s face. She squints.

‘What terrible stench?’ she asks, shielding herself from the light. Magdalena notices a long, red streak growing on her sister’s forearm. Regina hides her arm under the sheets again.

‘You can’t smell it?’ he says. ‘It smells like a coffin after three weeks burial! Phooey! How you country girls like to live!’ He swings the lantern around again, shining the light throughout the room and then walks out and shuts the door behind himself.

The door clicks shut and Magdalena waits until the echo of the sound has died down. ‘Well? What happened?’

Regina takes a deep breath. ‘Didn’t you see anything?’

‘I can see a wound on your arm and I can smell something disgusting. But otherwise I was asleep.’

Regina moans. ‘How could you? I asked you to stay awake!’

‘What happened? Tell me!’

Regina lies down. ‘No. You couldn’t stay awake for me, so I won’t tell you.’

‘Oh please! At least tell me if whatever it is on your arm hurts, so I can get something to heal it.’

‘No. I will do that myself in the morning.’

Magdalena lies down in the bed and tosses and turns until she falls asleep again and dreams of dusting the students once more.

*

Regina in the Otherworld

[¹⁴]

*

After she had directed her devotions in the house of God, she went into the town to search for Klement’s house.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p99

Regina prays

¹⁴ And when Regina finds the old ghosts sitting on the end of her bed, she sits up straight and asks him. ‘Who are you and what do you want?’ And he replies ‘I want to redeem myself, I want to fulfill the promise I made to the Holy Mother and I want to free myself from this earthly bondage.’ Regina is puzzled. ‘Why have you chosen me?’ He replies, ‘It is not my doing, I was told that your light shines brighter than the rest.’ She asks, ‘Who are you, and what do you want from me?’ He replies, ‘I am Klement Zwespenbauer and you are to go to my earthly wife and take the money I killed for. I am in agony; here is but a share of this agony which awaits you if you do not fulfill my command.’ And he reaches his arm out towards her and she sees that his fingers are flames and she cannot move away from him because her body is as a stone and only her soul is awake and as he encircles her arm with his fingers she feels a great, great pain and begins to scream. ‘This is not just!’ she screams. ‘I am not your handmaid and I will not be commanded by a murderer!’ And through her screams she floats above the palace and she can see the nightwatchman running in from the courtyard and she can see her sister’s glowing soul returning to her body in awakening and through the rush of heat and agony Regina returns to her own body and there is a pain in her arm and a light shining in her eyes.

Holy Mother, Holy

Mother, here I am

again, here by you in this sacred place, this

place so

quiet, so

peaceful so

big and empty and so

light -

I can feel you behind me, within me, before me, around me, Holy Mother I am

your

daughter

but I am a daughter with a problem and must

have you answer me

the thing that keeps at my soul, the

nothing that touches me, that

burns me, that pains me

I am no longer

afraid

of it

it touches my body but it

does not

touch my soul

look, My Mother, look

at the long burn, the red flesh

that I offer up to you;

it

touched me, *it*

wanted to hurt me,

clothe me in the stench of the

grave,

burn me in a malice, a malice

of a man

who does not get his way

look, My Mother; we have

seen

this type of behaviour before,

you and I.

Am I

sinful

because I do not want to do

its

bidding?

Am I sinful
because I no longer
fear
this thing, this
nothing
?

Holy Mother, is
fear
a
virtue?

Let me breathe, my dearest
Mother,
let me
rest, give me
ease

Holy Mother, I need an
answer I need Your
reply I need You to

tell me what to do now.¹⁵

Yes, yes Holy Mother. I know what to do. I will

go

not to do *its*

bidding, but to

help

my

self.

*

Regina eases herself up from her knees and the creaking wood of the pew-kneeler. She is alone in the huge cathedral, and despite the light coming in from the high, long windows, it is dark closer to the ground. She feels as though she is wading through the dark. As she moves towards the stone basin that holds the holy water, a door creaks open and a young student walks in, swishing his black robes around himself. He walks towards Regina as though he does not see her, his shoulders set and his head held high. She moves a little out of the way, but he seems to anticipate her path and move ever towards her no matter which way she subtly turns.

Something inside Regina bursts and a hot bubble descends into her belly. She stands still, both her feet placed square on the ground. The young man moves closer

¹⁵ The Holy Mother replies; 'You know yourself what to do, my daughter. I trust you to understand the path you alone must take.'

and closer to her, as though she was not there. Regina knows that he is going to collide with her, try to knock her off her course.

At the last moment possible he swerves to her left side and it is only his thick black cloak that disturbs the wool of her skirt. The young man clears his throat, not looking at Regina at all.

She does not speak.

‘I beg your pardon?’ he says as he moves towards the altar.

But Regina has already moved away from him and is opening the door to the bright day outside.

She takes a deep breath of the air, but it is still and there is no breeze on the street outside. It is as if the walls surrounding the city have stopped the entrance of the air as well, and as Regina peers over the stone walls up to the hills, her chest feels heavy and she chokes on her breath. High up on the church wall, just above and over the battlement, someone is sitting on the church’s privy that juts out over the city limits. Regina turns away from the flow of waste, and hurries down past the newly built Jesuit seminary, stumbling from time to time over the damp cobblestones. She feels that she has to hurry away from the twisting little street, as though someone is watching her from one of the windows that towers up so high, three stories up, almost as high as the attics in the Pálffy palace, where she and her sister watch people on the street to pass their free moments. She does not know where she must go to, so she follows the turns of the alleyways and lanes that meander through the city.

And then Regina is lost. A crowd of people pass her as she stands in the middle of the street to avoid the runnels of waste that flow down the curbs closer to the houses. The crowd jostle past her, and she is pecked at by a basket of hens, and

scratched by a faggot of twigs, and almost kicked by a donkey. But the tide soon passes and she is left standing there, the shadows of the houses reaching towards her feet. Her heart leaps a little, she does not know what time it is, or how long she has been away from her work. She looks up at the sky, wondering whether or not to turn around and try to find her way home.

‘Hey there, missy,’ a scratched voice calls to her. ‘What’s a tidy young lady like you doing in this part of town?’

Regina puts her hand up to pat her hair, and notices that a lock has escaped her white maid’s cap. She turns around to see who is calling out to her and sees an old, old man with a long tangled beard and dirty, gnarled hands sitting in a doorway. She gathers her cloak closer around herself despite the suffocating humid air and the stench of humanity.

‘I am lost,’ she says.

‘I can see that.’ The old man cackles and scratches his shaggy head. ‘Are you looking for anything in particular? Or anyone?’ he leers.

Regina’s mouth purses in distaste.

‘Alright, alright missy!’ the old man, ‘you don’t have to look at a poor old man like that. Just trying to have some fun.’

‘Not at my expense,’ she mutters, clenching her fists.

‘Eh? What was that?’ the old man puts a hand behind his ear, cupping his lobes, hoping to catch the sound.

Regina draws herself up. ‘Where can I find the house of Klement Zwespenbaur?’ she asks.

The man frowns. His whole face seems to fold into his huge, dirty beard. 'Ach, poor Klement,' he sighs. 'Poor, poor Klement.'

Regina sighs. 'Where is his house?' she asks again.

'He's come back, hasn't he?' The old man looks up at her from beneath his straggling eyebrows.

Regina's body jolts and she feels faint. She shivers.

'He's come back for his money. Aha, I knew it!' the man slaps his thigh. 'So the murdering bastard has come back!'

Regina turns on her heel and runs back down the little street. She runs and runs until the heel of her shoe twists away again and she falls onto the cobblestones, smearing her clothes with the greasy black dirt beneath her.

Her whole body slumps forward, and angry tears gather in her eyes. She clenches her fists and gives out one loud and frustrated cry. She sits in the middle of the street, trying to gather the shreds of her dignity, but one by one faces appear in the windows surrounding her, one or two of the doors open, strange faces peering out at her. The heel of her shoe sits square on a cobblestone in front of her. Regina pokes out her tongue at it.

Somewhere, someone laughs, and there is the rustle of starched flax coming towards her, and a hand lays itself on her shoulder. 'Come now,' a soft and low voice speaks. 'These cobbles are so dirty, come in and let us clean you up before you go home.'

Regina says nothing, but allows a pair of strong arms pull her up, a strong shoulder to support her as she hobbles into one of the little houses that line the street. Once inside, she allows a chair to be pushed underneath her bottom, and sits back and

allows the fragrance of damp stone and garlic to surround her. A pair of hands is unlacing her shoe and manipulating her ankle, twisting it around this way and that. 'Nothing broken, no strain, maybe a bruise or two.' Regina looks down and sees an incredibly green pair of eyes twinkling up at her from beneath a white cap that is a little soft, a little discoloured. The eyes are accompanied with a bright and wide smile that spreads out over fleshy, red, shining cheeks. 'How do you do, I am Frau Zwespenbauer. My dirty neighbour called me, said you were looking for my house. Who are you and what are you doing here?'

Regina feels a hole drop in her belly. She closes her eyes.

Holy Mother, Holy Mother, how did I get here? How did you send me here?

'I was sent by your husband.' Her eyes remain closed.

Regina opens one eyes and sees the smile turn into a frown, the warmth recede.

'What do you want?'

'This is very embarrassing for me.' Regina looks down at her hands. She notices her nails are cracked and flaking. *Bother the lye!* She thinks. She looks up and into the incredible green eyes, which look like pieces of flint at the moment. 'Your husband, Klement Zwespenbauer, is bothering me. He comes to me at night and refuses to appear before anyone else. He touches me. He has told me that he demands a sum of money back.'

The blonde eyebrows above the green eyes arc up. 'You're right. That is very embarrassing for you. You are a crazy liar.'

‘But he comes to me every night and demands that I get the money from you! Look,’ she pushes up her sleeve and shows the older woman her arm. ‘Look what he’s done to me. And that’s not the first time, either.’

Frau Zwespenbauer shrinks back from Regina. ‘I will have nothing to do with this. How dare you come into my home and try and frighten an old woman? I do not believe you!’

Regina leans forward and begins to lace her shoe up. The blood rushes to her head.

‘If I were you, young lady,’ the older woman’s voice is stern, ‘I would go to a priest. I think you are either spiteful or bewitched. Why do you want to frighten me like this?’

Regina places her foot on the ground with a thud, lets her skirts drop over her knees. She looks into the green, green eyes, her own eyes narrow. She gathers up the last of her courage before she speaks. ‘Your husband also spoke of a carving of the Holy Mother that he wants to have made.’

The older woman moans. She leans forward and cradles her head in her hands. ‘What do you know of this?’ she whispers.

‘Nothing except what I have told you.’ Regina manages to keep her voice calm.

‘It is true, before he died he made a vow. Who can say whether a soul has the power to come back? Particularly such an ordinary soul as my Klement.’ The widow wipes her eyes and looks up at Regina. She smiles. ‘Please, have the carving made. Release my poor dead husband.’

Regina taps her feet on the floor. 'How can I do that without the money? I am a laundry-maid and own nothing.'

Frau Zwespenbauer kneads the fabric of her skirts between her hands. She clears her throat, then scratches her armpit. She stands up and walks to the window, twitching the yellowing crotchet of the curtain. She pulls the spidery fabric about for a while. 'Hmm.' She murmurs. 'Hmmm.' Over and over. Regina sighs. The sun is beginning to slant across the floor, and she is worried.

Frau Zwespenbauer turns and faces the girl. 'You know, until just this moment it must have slipped my mind. I am an old woman, and my memory is leaving me. You know how it is with us old people. Now that I come to think of it, my poor Klement did leave some money behind. I think that he had found it somewhere, but I can't quite remember what he told me anymore.'

Regina stands up. 'Please try and find it for me. He won't leave me alone until I get this work done. I am tired of him.'

The widow turns towards her. There are tears in her eyes. 'Doesn't he frighten you?'

A wry smile twists Regina's lips. 'Not anymore.'

*

The shadows are very long when Regina returns back to the Pálffy palace. She enters through the street door, creaking open the huge, heavy wooden doors. She moves down the stone stairs, trailing her fingers along the old-fashioned arched and pointed decorations, down into the cellar of the house where the walls are rougher,

and darker with soot of candles and lanterns. She wrinkles her nose at the smell of cabbage that is floating up from the kitchen, but then steels her senses against it. She comes to the kitchen door and begins to push it open with her fingertips, but it is wrenched away from her touch and the door is flung fully open and Regina's aunt stands before her, her face red and her breath heavy. She seizes Regina's arm, pulls her into the kitchen and slams the door shut onto the rest of the household.

Regina screams. The burn beneath her sleeve has been disturbed.

'Where have you been?' Tante screeches. 'We have been waiting and waiting for you. How dare you leave just like that?'

Regina pulls her arm out of Tante's grasp, nursing it close to her chest. The uncle is sitting at the head of the kitchen table, staring at her.

'Where have you been?' he rumbles, tapping his thick fingers on the heavy wooden surface. The little sound gallops through the room.

'I-' Regina's voice falters. 'I needed to see someone.'

'I will not tolerate you mixing with all sorts, you know that.' He growls. 'Especially not those woman-worshipping fanatics! Blasphemers!'

'Who did you see? Where were you?' Tante shakes Regina by the shoulders. The older woman's breath smells of a dark place that comes from deep within her belly.

'We take you in,' the uncle slaps the table, 'we give you work for which to are proving to be quite useless, we feed and clothe you, we expect nothing more than a little due respect to the Evangelical church and its laws, and look at you! You behave like a wild animal, staying sick for three weeks, *three weeks*, shrieking in the night, ruining the laundry, taking up all of your sister's time, and leaving - just *disappearing*

from your work and going heaven-knows-where and with God only knows who! Are you insane?' He points at Tante, his finger shaking. 'And it is all your fault, taking in the children of such a turncoat, your brother who turned away from the Holy Evangelium and went back to those dogs of papists!'

Tante turns pale, but does not release her grip on Regina.

'Where have you been?' the older man screams. He moves towards Regina, but she cannot shrink back as her aunt holds her. The uncle raises his arm and slaps Regina's face.

'Tell me,' he snarls.

There are tears beginning to course down Regina's cheeks.

'You won't believe me,' she whispers.

He raises his hand again and moves closer towards her.

'Don't! *Don't!*' she cries. 'There's a evil spirit that's pestering me! He told me to go to his widow and get some money! That's where I was today! The widow knows something about it! Stop!' she shrieks as he streaks his palm across her face again.

'You little liar,' he replies. 'You will go to hell for sure, telling such crazy lies. I've never heard such stupidity in my life before. It's evil. *You're* evil. You had better tell me the truth or I will take you before the church council and they can try you for a witch, if you consort with evil spirits!'

Regina's knees give way, but her aunt holds her firm. The girl dangles somewhere between fear and the ground beneath her.

'I am telling you. I am being bothered by a spirit. I've been to the priest, and asked for advice, and I've been - asking what it wants, and it wants money from its

widow. That's where I've been. Please!' Regina's stomach churns and she has the desire to vomit.

'Damned papists! To think they believe in such nonsense! I could give as good advice as any of their female-worshipping priests! Why didn't you ask *me*, hey?' he leers. He moves forward and strikes Regina's face again. The flesh on her cheek bones is beginning to turn a mottled red with little spots. 'You are never to go back to that woman again. You are to stay here and learn your work properly. If you need any advice you will ask *me* and no-one else. I refuse to have the stain of a witch in this house!'

Regina tries to wipe her eyes but finds a great pain in that part of her.

'Better still,' the uncle continues, 'if you love the papists so much, why don't you go to them for protection? They know how to burn your kind better than we do!'

The aunt shudders, and releases her grip on Regina. Regina's body takes over and she runs from the room, pushing through the doors, up the steps, through the dark entrance hall, and out onto the darkening street.

*

Holy Mother, Holy

Mother

why me? What

am I being punished for, oh sweet mother, what have I done, what have I done,
what have I

done?

See, my chest is on fire, and it is so dark now and the streets, the streets themselves are closing in above me, see the houses reach together as though I am in a long tunnel and I have nowhere to go, see how my head hurts, my face, it is not my face, it is swollen and the flesh reaches out and away from my bones, see how my knees tremble, surely I am in hell, surely I am being burned alive, but for what, for what for what? See, my footsteps, see how the ground moves quickly beneath my feet, watch, see that little cobble there how it stick out from the rest I had better be careful or I will trip over it and then where will I be, where will I be, on the ground, the dirty ground maybe that is all I am good for, maybe that is fit punishment for me, such a sinner as I am, where am I where, am I going somewhere, the streets are so dark -

now the ground has received me and it is hard underneath my back but perhaps that is all I am

good

for

What hand is this that

reaches

for me? Whose hand is coming towards me? Is it Magdalena? Is it - dare it be - a wise woman? What colour is this sleeve?

It is too

bright, too

warm, it is the colour of

‘Who are you, little one?’

‘I, I am cold.’

‘I can see that, running out in the street without a proper cloak. Come with me.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘Only to the collegium. You can warm yourself in the refactory.’

‘Am I, dare I, am I *allowed* in there?’

‘Anyone who is in trouble can go to our place of safety! Of course you are *allowed* in there!’

‘But I am such a sinner! I am stained and tainted and bound for hell and -’

‘Surely such a young one cannot have so heavily a burdened soul! Come and warm yourself and you can tell me all about your sins.’

Holy Mother, where are you leading me? See this great stone archway, see how the door swings open for me, see look how the men stare, they are all dressed so finely, even in the dark their robes give off the light of the sun, Holy Mother, where am I? Through this door and this door and even still they stare at me and here is the fire, Oh Mother, surely I will be consumed by such a flame!

‘Now just sit here and tell me what is the matter.’

Regina opens her mouth and the words pour out.

The Jesuit priest sits and listens. ‘My child,’ he says. ‘My poor, poor child. There are so many things that we as humans do not understand. I cannot answer why

this is happening to you, but I can tell you that you are too young and too innocent to have this as a punishment hanging over you. Perhaps it is a sign to show you where the true path of God lies? Perhaps it is a test sent to you, to test your strength. I cannot give you an answer, but I can help you.'

Tears begin to flow down Regina's cheeks, but she remains silent and still. There is only a barely noticeable tremor running through her body.

'I myself will go tomorrow to the house of the widow of this Klement and see what I can do with her. And I will give you the words to curse this unclean spirit and send it back to its place. Just try it if it come back to you, and see how well these words will defend you!' He gives a chuckle. 'And now I will escort you back to your home, because the city night is no fit place for a young lady such as yourself.'

He stands up, and as Regina stands, she stumbles over her stool. He catches her by the elbow to steady her, and feels the tremor running through her body. He does not let go of her arm, but instead pulls her gently through the building and through the short distance of street between the collegium and the place of Regina's work. He knocks on the gate, pulls the girl through the door past the wide-eyed leers of the nightwatchman, and knocks on the servant's entrance door. Her uncle opens the door, frowning at both priest and the shuddering girl, but allows her back in. He does not say anything as she shuts the door in the priest's face.

The spirit showed himself again. Regina begged him to leave her in peace. 'No,' he said, 'I will not leave your side or yield until you complete this thing, wherever and however far you might flee, I will always follow!' He swore to her, she promised that he guaranteed no further delay and need. The maiden even now had

nothing more to suffer from people than from the spirit itself. Especially/particularly the non-Catholics kept these notes all for exposing a fairy-tale, magic, or the devil's work. The advice also was given, that when she was in the middle of these torments by herself, to free herself for all time from the spirit, she should utter the same curse when a manifestation appeared before her.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, pp100-101

Here the silence

suffocates

me.

Here, in this stinking room, here behind the walls I can hear

nothing.

No wind, no leaves stirring, no animals or birds, not even my snoring sister, nothing, nothing, nothing. Here in this house of rich men, here where there are gold and crimson and strange carved things gathering dust out of the sight of anyone, here where the coffer flows with jewels and there is food enough to feed a village for three years, here there is one little place of

nothing.

The silence is pressing into my

head it

squeezes into my

head and my

chest, it

flattens me out so that I am like parchment, and I

tremble

like parchment in the fire.

They are going to burn me for sure. They think I am in league with the

devil,

they are going to torture me and do

things

to me just like they did to my poor, poor Oma Rosa.

Holy Mother, Holy Mother, Holy Mother, why is this happening to me what did I ever do except try and seek the wisdom of the cunning women and anyway that was not my idea but the silly idea of my silly sister who knows so little about these matters and was too young ever to know that they did to Oma Rosa and thinks that these matters are just so, so,

easy

and thin and can be treated lightly like she treats the young men so lightly, she is so young and silly and has never tasted this fear that I can taste, she thinks that it is so easy, so easy, so

easy

and look the whole room is spinning, even in the

darkness

I can see it spinning and it spins itself into streaks of light, streaks of ugly light that are spinning and spinning and look;

he is here

Why is he staring at me with such a
sad
face?

I have done what you asked, I have
gone where you told me to
go,

I have risked so much for you, you horrid old man, you
murderer!

Why are you asking *me* to
cleanse your sins?

If you want to be free from whatever it is that holds you
you must free yourself!

I
am
innocent
of
you

Regina feels a howl growing in the pit of her stomach. She thrusts away the darkness and silence that press upon her, and sitting up in her bed she screams, 'By the power of all the sacraments! Leave here, you old rascal, go back where you came from, you have nothing to do with me!'

The air in front of her shimmers, and limb by limb the apparitions fades until there is nothing left but the shadow of the sad expression hanging in the darkness. The door opens and Magdalena's voice hisses through the darkness, 'For the love of the Holy Mother, Regi, *shut up!*'

*

It is evening and Regina is tired. She has immersed herself in her work the whole day, concentrating on creating a perfection in the clothes she cleans and wrings and hangs and irons and stitches, concentrating on bleaching a faultless whiteness in the fabric that passes through her dry hands. She wants now nothing more than to lie on her bed and close her eyes into oblivion. She does not care for food, or wine, or even the frigid companionship around the table in the servants' kitchen. She does not want to talk with her sister. She does not even want to be alone, since the dank silence of her room oppresses her. She is restless, yet aches for something which she cannot define.

Her aunt asks her to go up to the attic and search for a gown that the Graf's wife wants repaired for the next season. Regina approaches the stairs, puts her hand on the grey stone banister, puts one foot on the first step and is seized by a great fear of the staircase.

From some room somewhere, Magdalena rushes out, a dusting cloth in her hand and wisps of dirt straggling from her hair. Regina turns towards her sister, whose face holds the expression *Don't go up there, don't go*. In unison the sisters turn towards their aunt, who holds in her hands a copy of the dress's pattern so that Regina

will recognize the gown. It droops from her fingers, swinging a little. All three women are stilled, paralyzed, and it takes the sound of feet crunching through a dusty hall towards them to break this dizzying moment.

‘Get going,’ the aunt says. ‘There’s work to be done, and no sleep until it is finished!’

Magdalena looks into Regina’s eyes.

I am frightened.

Don’t go.

Stay here and protect me.

Tante stamps her foot. ‘Go, you lazy girls! Why did I ever invite you two shiftless, useless, stupid children here in the first place? Get to work!’ She places her hands on her hips and narrows her eyes until Magdalena looks from Regina to the aunt and back, and shuffles out backwards, one step and a time. Regina places her other foot on the step, reaches up a bit higher on the banister, and pulls herself up, one step and a time. She senses something holding her back, a great tie that does not want to stretch with her as she climbs on.

As she climbs the stairs, the light begins to fade as dusk creeps in through the narrow stone arches which are studded with thick little glass panes. She can hear the sounds of the Graf’s children behind the carved wooden doors that divide the palace between the family and the servants. She climbs, up and up, and the air becomes dry and hot. She begins to perspire underneath her black working gown, but does not push

up her sleeves, or unbutton the high collar. She begins to feel a little dizzy, but continues up the steps.

At the top of the stairs she reaches forward and pushes open the door of the attic. Thin streams of light flow in from the slit-windows on the roof. Regina looks around, but all she can see are the dust-motes dancing in the breeze wave of the open door. She sighs and steps into the attic, and turns to close the door behind her.

The dusk turns to night and there is a figure standing between the door and the doorframe. Regina jumps back, but despite the beating of her heart she feels strangely calm. She stares into the face of the old man. As she captures his gaze and holds it, she does not notice the arm rising above her, nor does she notice the arm descending until she feels a blow to her head that makes her teeth chatter and the world around her disappear. Through the darkness she can feel a sticky wetness on her face that stings her skin.

She wakes to a rotting stench and her sister's fingers patting her face, feeling, feeling, feeling all over her. It hurts her to move her eyelids, but she looks up and sees a lamplight that contains the faces of her aunt, the nightwatchman who is yawning, and several other servants all staring at her. She does not care who is looking, her mind is blank and still.

‘What is that disgusting stink?’ someone mutters.

‘Smells like someone died up here.’

‘And not too long ago at that!’

‘Pfui!’

‘I feel sick.’

‘Look at all that blood.’

‘Can you see a wound on her?’ Magdalena asks, her voice cutting through the chatter. ‘Give me the light, for heaven’s sake!’

The light shines in Regina’s eyes.

‘Can’t see a thing.’

‘No, just a whole of blood.’

‘And look at that bruise!’

‘Don’t touch her! She must be in pain!’

‘Phoo! Just smell that stuff! That’s not blood, it’s corpse-juice or something!

My grandfather stunk like that when he’d been dead for a week.’

‘Argh, that’s disgusting! Wipe it off.’

‘Now I’ll go and have to *wash* it off. That’s even worse. I don’t want to stink like that!’

‘Too late, you already do.’

Magdalena swings towards the young men. ‘Just get out of here. Can’t you see that my sister’s in pain, you rotten louts?’

And laughing, they clatter out of the room, wafting a trail of the stench behind them.

Magdalena and Tante crouch closer to Regina, who lies rigid on the floor. Magdalena touches her cheek, pressing onto the bruised skin. ‘What happened?’ she asks.

‘He, he, he . . .’ Regina breathes.

‘He what?’ Tante snaps. ‘*Who* what?’

Magdalena turns and glares at her.

‘He, he, he . . .’ Magdalena turns back and looks into Regina’s eyes.

‘What did he do to you?’

‘He hit me.’

‘Why?’

‘I cursed him last night.’

Regina’s world sinks away and fades into blackness.

*

A whisper; ‘Regi, Regi, wake up.’

Silence.

Again, ‘Regi, Regi, sweetheart, you must wake up. At least move something to let me know you can hear me!’

Regina’s head rolls on its thin pillow until her face is next to the wall.

‘I must tell you something, and it’s not nice.’

Despite the midday sun outside, the little room is dark and a slit of light from the tall, thin stone window crawls imperceptibly on the wall high above the two women.

‘Bother you, Regina Fischer, listen to me!’

Nothing.

‘Sister, listen to me!’

‘Go away and stop entering my mind. I have no mind.’

Magdalena's hands clench, she grits her teeth, but she closes her eyes and tries to lose herself in a certain calmness that she invokes despite her tense muscles.

'Sister, you must be healed. You are in great danger.'

'What is danger to me now? Go away or I will shut my mind against you.'

'Then you will die.'

Regina's body begins to twitch, just the fingertips and the toes.

'It is meaningless, death. Leave me alone.'

A moan escapes from Magdalena's lips.

'They are watching you, I hope you know that.'

'Yes. I know. I don't care.'

'You should care. You know we've seen this sort of thing before. You should remember.'

'I don't care to remember. Now get out of my mind.'

A gust of stale air flows into the room, the door opens and the aunt stands in the doorway, her hands on her hips.

'Get her out of bed and into the laundry,' she snarls. 'I will not tolerate your wicked, wicked ways. Just try it and see where it will get you.'

Magdalena turns, loses her balance, and falls off the edge of the bed. She looks up at her aunt, but then leans forward and retches. She shakes her head, but sits up slowly, panting. Regina opens one eye and yawns. Then she resumes her sleeper's attitude, pale and cold and very, very still.

The aunt rushes to the bed, stumbling over Magdalena sitting on the floor. She grabs the edges of the bed to stop her fall, then shakes the straw-filled mattress, tumbling Regina's body up and down. Regina bounces with the motion, but otherwise remains inert.

'Leave her, leave her!' Magdalena cries. There are tears running down her cheeks. 'She is sick! Didn't you see what happened to her?'

The aunt turns to the girl sitting on the floor in a heap. 'You!' her hair straggles on her perspiring forehead, and in the space of a breath Magdalena can smell her odour of unwashed clothes and goose-fat.

There is something about the girl's stare that makes the older woman stand up and start to back away. She leaves the room and slams the door shut behind her.

Magdalena calls forth all her powers, but the sound escapes her lips.

'Bitch!' she murmurs, and then her skin reddens.

She looks up at Regina, who still lies as on the bed as though she is stone.

Holy Mother help me Holy Mother help me Holy Mother help me Holy Mother help me

The impression of the words run through Magdalena's mind, and she tries to snatch at them, but the silent sound fades away as soon as she clenches her muscles.

‘Very well,’ she murmurs, brushing away a strand of hair from her sister’s forehead, then tucking a stray lock of her own hair behind her ear. ‘If it’s the Mother’s help you want, it will be the Mother’s help you will get! And damn anyone who tries to call me the devil’s helper!’

*

Stephan the nightwatchman is drunk and snoring behind the laundry. He is oblivious to the light thud of the courtyard door, which swings open to the rhythm of the night breeze. He is warm enough from the quantities of borovička that seep through from his empty stomach into his blood. When he wakes, his vision will be blurred enough not to notice the footsteps in the mud that lead to and from the door in courtyard wall.

The three women and Magdalena are gathered around Regina’s bed once more. Their boots, sticky with mud, grass and a little horse dung, are brushed by the nettles that Magdalena has placed all around the bed.

‘Why are we at this site again?’ the oldest woman whispers. ‘The love of the Mother cannot penetrate in this place.’

‘Sshh.’ The mellow voice of the dark-haired woman soothes. ‘We are on a battlefield after a battle. We must tend to the wounded warrior.’

A high, lilting whisper begins. ‘Healing Lady,’ it chants,

‘Heal, oh Mother, Heal

the sick earth,

the illness here

that infests your body and
soul
drive out the bad air,
the bad spirit
refresh yourself and be clean again,
be whole again,
Dearest Goddess,
tend to your little seed!’

‘Hands, ladies!’ In the dark, a rustle as six hands are placed upon Regina’s body. ‘You too, little sister. You too must help this healing, for you are of her blood and can contribute much. Come.’

Eight hands lie on the still girl’s flesh. Eight hands that, through the depth of the night, come to shimmer and glow a little, eight hands like eight spots of blue heat that both burn and cool, eight hands singing in the night.

‘She is very, very cold.’ Someone whispers. ‘We must use more strength to drive out the malady that possesses her.’

‘It is fear that possesses her,’ another whisper, ‘fear and the lack of will to look in its face.’

‘How can she drive out the fear herself when she will not meet it?’ the lightest voice asks. ‘We must, then, give her courage.’

‘We may not do that. Remember always; if that which you seek you findest not within you, you will never find it without you.’

‘But surely the Mother will aid her!’

‘Yes, but she must be the one to approach Her.’

‘Then what is your work here?’

There is a silence through which a shudder creeps. The dim blue glow of the hands fades for an instant before it returns, brighter and stronger.

‘Never, ever doubt.’

‘Yes, littlest one. You have the strength of mind to call for us, but you do not yet have the heart to feel us. Sisters, should we continue?’

‘Tsk, what a question!’

There is silence again, and the occasional rustle as someone shuffles from foot to foot. A heat begins to gather in the room, and soon the smell of fresh perspiration begins to mingle with the smell of crushed nettles. There is a metallic tang to the scent, a blood scent of the womb that pours out from one of the women’s skin.

Magdalena begins to discern a small hum, a light sound like that of a happy brook, cold and refreshing and unceasing. It is a sound that settles her, unknots the apprehension in her belly, relaxes her hands. Soon she begins to notice that her hands seem to rise away from her sister’s body, and yet at the same time she can still feel Regina’s dry, slightly hairy limb. Magdalena wants to be puzzled by this but the heat that fills the room focuses her thoughts on the work.

The heat is like a bubble that presses down and down over the five women. Regina begins to shuffle underneath it, swaying from side to side, voluptuous, sinuous, slow. Her breathing is even and deep, and if there were any light, the small smile on her lips might be seen.

In Magdalena’s mind’s eye, she can see a shaft of pure white light descending and entering Regina’s crown, running through her spine and flowing out from between her legs. In a moment of utter clarity, she can see the light at the same time

she can feel the bubble of heat burst over the room and at the same time the room is suddenly cold and she can no longer see anything but the darkness of the room and smell the sweat of five women.

‘The work is done,’ someone cackles.

‘What have we done?’ Magdalena moans.

‘Merely cleared a channel,’ is the answer. ‘So that she does not become blocked by her own fear anymore.’

‘It is the beginning of any healing,’ comes another whisper. ‘It is all we may do at this point.’

‘Oh. Oh.’ Magdalena stutters.

‘Come sisters,’ the mellow voice laughs. ‘This one is exhausted. Let us cloak ourselves and disappear.’

The darkness becomes thicker, and as Magdalena leads the three women from room to room to door to courtyard to gate, it seems as though their sounds disappear, melt into the darkness. And in the morning Stephan the nightwatchman curses his hangover, wandering through the muddy courtyard with a hazy path, his footsteps crushing the light impressions of the three cunning women.

*

Regina in the Mirror

So they call in the priests who

tell me that the widow won’t talk to them

either

she won't talk, she won't talk, and I

am here in the count's

court

I do not know

why

how

what

brought me here

Holy Mother, did You

set my feet on this course in the night, did You

lead me here, in this

paradise of crimson and dark wood and velvet and gold and marble did You

make me walk here in my

sleep,

why am I here?

Look how the carpet shimmers in the moonlight, it ripples, so soft, such silk, they say, from so far, far away, further even, than I have come. It is like grass under my feet, my secret walking feet who transport me away from my bed without even telling me, treacherous feet, why do you walk me to where I may not go?

I feel so

clear

I feel so moon-like, look how She shines through the window panes, all in little pieces, scattering Her fullness like light in water, like the brook at home, like the

waves from the little waterfall where we would gather our herbs and bathe, cleansing ourselves, clean, cool, and beautiful. Holy Mother, what

am I here for? Why have I woken

here in this

room, this

chamber of richness, this is not for me, this is not

my

room, for my room stinks of treacherous corruption, foul

mould that grows and grows on the walls, a living carpet of filth, not clean, not clean and sweet like this silk underneath my feet, nothing like that, what am I fit for, then if You, Holy Mother, tease my feet and walk me from that little cave to this big cavern, this chamber, the heart of the house, so carved and shaped my man's hands, so clever, so beautiful, so unlike

nature

Have You brought me here to face my

enemy?

I do not

sense

him near me, I do not sense anything near me, no sound, no light except the moon's, no scent, no taste, no

nothingness

here, a perfect balance between all and

nothing and thus cancelling both out, a perfect middle way, a perfect calm, and perfect, logical, planned out indifference. A

void,

but a beautiful one.

Here is a mirror, see, the moon's light shines

one my face and I can

see

into the mirror - let me explore, though,

let me see the frame in which I will approach what I will see;

great and gold and bulging and full of

dead life

none of these angels and fruits can be

eaten, if I touch them they will not

fly from my grasp, they will not

sweeten my tongue, nor fill my hunger, or soothe my sorrow like the mangiest of worm-eaten apple-fall, or the humblest of true angels with dirty feet and tatty wings. None of this fine golden coldness makes me

feel

anything

let me, then, let me look into the mirror and see my

face

bathed in white moonlight, let me

see

my skin, my eyes, my mouth, my hair, my nose let me see into myself let me

view

me and

oh!

Who is

that

?

That is a girl who I do not

know,

no, these features are not

me. I *do not* recognize this one, this face, this stretch of skin, this moonlight, it
is not me so then who is it? My face does not look like that, that is not my flesh,
whose features are those? Why am I feeling

dizzy?

Look at her, look how her skin

absorbs the moonlight, look how her hair glistens as though the light is water,

why then is there such a heat welling up in me? Can

she

in the mirror feel that heat? Who is

she?

I will blink

But she is still there, looking, looking, looking back at me, at me, I cannot see myself, those features must be mine but they are not me, why it is as if my soul cannot recognize my face, who am I, then, if not me, if not that face, of not those eyes and lips and cheekbones and hair and brow, who am I then underneath that face, if

indeed

that face is mine?

Am I trapped, condemned

to stare at

that face

forever now?

Holy Mother,

who am I, who is Regina? Where

is she, for that is not her, that is not Regina, that is not me, that is not how I feel, so calm and pale and absorbent, so still and watery, that skin is not mine I am not me

look, look how the mirror lights up from behind, look

at all the light, feel, oh feel, the air rushing behind my back, something is happening here, something is passing through, look in the mirror and see all the lights, the candles, they are glowing and it is beautiful, look, who is passing through, where are you going, what are you, you are

spirits,

fleshless, formless,

light, bright,

happy,

you are passing, passing through, are you coming to take me with you, for I no longer recognize my flesh, I no longer know my bones, I am clear of such things, I am no longer part of this earth, see you dance ever upwards, light and spiralling around and around, dancing in the candles' lights, dancing with the lanterns, flickering, flickering, what are you

spirits

where are you going, will

you take me with you

for I have no purpose here, all I have here is

fear

and you are so happy, so happy, touch me with your happiness, cleanse me with your joy, let me laugh without sound, without voice, let me blend with you as the moonlight blends with the lamplight with the water and flow of your silent voices, oh

spirits

won't you talk with me, touch me, consume me, release me from this place, release me from this city from this house from this room from this body

take me up with you, take me up

spirits

I know you are going towards the Mother,

I know your dance, your laughter, your joy, I have felt it

once

before I know you have come to take me with you, otherwise why would my feet have walked me here without telling me, why would I have crept, asleep, from my bed and awoken here in this chamber of paradise, why else can I not see my self in the mirror, oh please

spirits

take me with you for I have no purpose here.

See, those arms which are not mine stretch

out towards you, golden streams of glowing light,

take me,

take me before the loud noise which is about to befall us

separates me from you and returns me to the flesh of

darkness.

Please,

spirits,

take me before I sink back into the night.

*

In the morning there is a great crowd in the courtyard, made up of the entire household. Regina wakes to their chattering, which penetrates even into her stuffy, stone-lined little chamber. She sits up, but feels ill and dizzy with the stale, mouldy

air. She closes her eyes for a moment, offers up a quick *Ave Maria* and stills herself to see how she feels.

She feels thick-headed, empty, and heavy, as though she has filched a little too much of her father's dandelion wine. When she stands she cannot centre herself, and falls back on the bed. A puff of hay-dust flies up around her when she lands on the mattress. She notices a twine of strange fibre curling between her toes, bends down and pulls it from her sticky feet. In the dim light of the room she cannot discern anything about it, so she pulls her dark gown over her head, pulls her stockings up without fastening the garters, slips into her much-mended shoes, and leaves the room.

She is surprised at the commotion in the courtyard. She plunges her hand in her pocket and slips the unknown fibre into its depths. She searches the crowd for Magdalena.

'Regi? Regi?' she hears the cry, and turns her head towards the sound. The light hurts her eyes, and her mouth feels dry and bitter. Magdalena is running towards her.

'What is happening?' she mutters. Her voice is thick and rough.

But Magdalena does not notice. She is hopping from foot to foot, her eyes bright, but she is perspiring.

'Last night - everyone saw it - where were you? I looked for you, but you weren't - Stephan woke us all up, although it must have woken everyone by itself, didn't you - no-one was there, Stephan had the key, everything was shining, the whole top floor, didn't you didn't you, everyone saw it, even the Graf himself, and his wife and the children, everyone was so frightened, where were you? And then, and then, there was a loud *bang* and the statue, the statue flew. They say, no-one saw it, but it

couldn't have landed there by itself, it's too - what is the matter with you? You look sicker than ever!'

Regina smiles, but the smile has no heart. Rather, her heart has sunk, and she feels as though she is falling. She looks over her shoulder and sees her aunt and uncle standing in a corner away from the rest of the crowd of the household. They are whispering together, casting sidelong glances at Regina, whose mind cannot register anything more than their plain clothes, their sparse, pared-down appearance in comparison with the rest of the household crowd.

'I feel sick,' she murmurs, but Magdalena does not hear her and rather turns away to flirt and laugh with one or two of the students, who have arrived to view the miracle of the flown statue. The dally with her, but they too glance furtively at Regina, who has an empty ring of space around her in the crowd.

The space around her moves, and shapes itself to a path that opens before her. Regina thinks of Moses and the Red Sea, but approaching her on this path is the Graf himself, his youngest daughter following him, peering with owl eyes at pale Regina. The courtyard falls under a silence, the last chord of chatter hanging in the air before it dissolves.

'Hrm hrm,' the Graf clears his throat. Regina looks down, noticing that her stockings have fallen and are sagging over the tops of her boots down onto their heels. She hears a hiss from the direction of her aunt and uncle, and quickly bends her knees in a curtsy. As she straightens, the toe of her bobbing leg snags the fallen stocking of the other foot, and she stumbles, weaving from side to side before the Graf's arm reaches out and snatches her from her fall. 'Good Lord!' someone in the crowd mutters. Regina feels herself redden, but the thin flush cannot be seen that well

underneath her pale, green-tinged skin. The Graf smiles as he looks down at her, but this smile, too, does not penetrate the stretch of his flesh over his cheekbones. The little girl behind his legs puts her thumb in her mouth, crushing the stiff perfection of the blanched white collar around her delicate neck.

‘Hrm,’ the Graf growls again. He puffs out his cheeks and glances at Regina’s aunt and uncle for a second. ‘I expect that you do not know about the heretic Quaker prophetesses of England?’ his eyebrows raise, and there is a low whistle from somewhere in the vicinity of the students standing near Magdalena.

Regina feels like she would like to vomit, but her stomach is empty. She begins to tremble and perspire. She opens her mouth but she cannot force her tongue to move. Suddenly the faded bruises on her face come to life and begin to throb. She can feel the yellow of the pain that enlivens her numbness. All of a sudden her knees give way and she falls down, the world around her turning, turning, turning, until she feels herself lifted up by many hands and carried away.

Not again, she thinks. Holy Mother, not again.

*

And now, Holy Mother, I
am floating, flying, wafting,
up to You like my

prayers, and I can see the beams of the ceiling, the floor above me, the wood, the beautiful carved and polished wood, so red so brown, and so unlike the trees that have been felled to make it so that man may walk over the heads of others.

See, I have

one eye open and can see half of

the world, my eye is open and the other

cannot open, it hurts so and I do not know

why. I cannot move my arms, and my legs are being

held aloft, is someone

carrying me or am I truly

floating, up to You, Holy

Mother, am I

dead, and if so, then why am I floating through

the house? This fine

palace of stone and wood, shaped so quickly by the hands and chisels of men instead of by the loving touch of slow, slow nature. Holy Mother of us all, where am I going? Heaven or

hell? What hell is there for those they try as

witches?

*

The many hands steer Regina up and up the winding staircase until they bear her into a room, and then another, and then another corner and into a small room that

faces the courtyard and has little light except from the little fire than burns in a small hearth. Regina peers around the room with her one open eye, noticing that the shadowy figure of a student remains in a corner, standing, waiting. She is thirsty, but feels that her stomach would rebel against any such liquid intrusion. She wonders if she feels dizzy, but does not want to lift her head to try. She is still, hoping that she will be left alone to lie there for a long, long time.

But the door opens and blows a gust of wind into the room that plays with the fire, and the heavy figure of the Graf hovers above Regina for a moment, then sits down on one of the ornate, carved wooden chairs. After shrinking a little from the Graf's gaze, Regina wonders how comfortable such a chair would be. She closes her eye.

'Perhaps it is inappropriate to talk to such a one before the whole rabble of the household, eh, Urovics?'

The student smiles, but does not reply.

'Do you think we should call a priest?' The Graf turns in his seat, the grosgrain of his trousers squeaking and scratching against the polished wood.

Oh, so that's why they need to be mended all the time, Regina thinks, and tries not to giggle.

The student clears his throat. 'I am not sure, Herr von Graf, but at this stage I wonder if the views of the church would coincide with our line of questioning?'

The Graf smiles. 'Very diplomatic. Very well put.' He leans forward in his seat. 'She looks a little less green around the gills. I hear she spends a lot of time being ill. Or avoiding work, they say.'

‘Surely, Sir, if she is truly being haunted, or bothered, she would be frightened out of her wits like a rabbit or some such lesser creature. They say that fear in women causes essential vapours to escape and in turn this leads to enervation and illness.’

‘Eh? Who say? What new theoretical nonsense are they teaching you these days?’

The student raises an eyebrow and smiles. He does not answer. He looks at Regina lying on the couch and nods at the Graf, who turns in his seat again to face her. His trousers squeak again, causing another slight anxiety within her.

Regina has opened one eye, and is peering from one man to the other.

The Graf smiles down at her, and she thinks of split pumpkins. ‘Well, well, young lady. I hear you have been causing my little home some consternation.’ His lips are red and wet.

‘I don’t know what you mean, Sir,’ her whisper is very, very quiet.

‘We have been told,’ the student shuffles his robes, ‘that you are being, ahem, *bothered*, by a spirit.’

Regina feels her face flush hot, and she looks down at her hands, which are folded over her midriff.

The Graf puffs his cheeks out even more, and bobs up and down in his seat.

‘We would like to talk to this thing ourselves,’ he says.

‘It wouldn’t be right, Sir,’ she says. ‘You wouldn’t be able to see it.’

The student and the Graf look at each other. ‘We want you to ask it a question then.’

Regina rolls her eyes. ‘Respectfully speaking, Sir, I don’t want to have anything to do with that thing anymore.’

‘Does it frighten you so much?’

‘Yes.’ She snaps. ‘No. It is not so much fear as - well, Sir, it is not a thing sent by the Holy Mother and so it is unclean and I want nothing to with it anymore!’

The Graf looks at the student, who lowers his eyes. ‘Despite the objections of the church,’ he murmurs, ‘we are men of knowledge and men of science.’ The Graf drums his fingers against the curlicued armrest. ‘We must observe this phenomenon, you understand that, young lady?’

A hot ride surges in Regina’s belly. She peers up again at the two men standing above her. ‘And if I will not?’

The Graf grins. ‘We can mention to the Evangelical authorities that you have been found to be consorting with *women* of - shall we say - a certain type.’

The student shuffles his robes once more. ‘We know where to find these poor hags, you know. Give them some liquor and they will say anything.’

*

Holy Mother, why is the

earth

falling away from me? Why

am I

falling? Where

will I

land?

*

At quarter to eleven in the night, Regina is brought to the Graf's little room again. Her aunt, who has made sure that she is clean, and is properly groomed, pulls her by the arm. Regina wants to tell her to stop, since the woman's hard fingers grip right into the burn on her arm, but she does not. She chokes back the pain, sending out from her arm through her belly through her feet and into the floor. Regina feels each step she takes to be too slow, whilst the walls around her move too fast towards the meeting with the Graf. She calls her sister with her mind, repeating her name over and over and over, but her sister does not come. Regina has the impression that her sister is somewhere out of the house, amongst trees, but her thoughts come and go as she is led deeper and deeper through the spiralling rooms of the house.

The aunt knocks on the door, and it is opened by the student, who indicates that Regina should sit on a chair that is in the centre of the room. The aunt leads her there, pushes her down on the chair, then stands by the door, her hands clasped in front of the bulge of her belly. The two men stare at her, and the Graf flicks his hand at her. She turns red and frowns, but leaves the room and pushes the door shut behind her. The sound echoes despite the room's small dimensions.

Regina is trembling. The two men turn to face her.

*

It is dark in the forest just outside the city's walls. The night creatures are treading the earth, their eyes reflecting no light, their senses beyond vision, beyond

the sun's touch. For those whose sight depends on the sun, each brush of a wing, each beat of a claw or tread of a paw is startling. The wind is very low, and it is possible to come to believe that the forest grows inwards in the night, capturing whatever it might find between its leaves and branches and undergrowth.

Magdalena is running through the undergrowth, crashing through the quiet plants, her footsteps crushing and tearing and beating down in her haste. She has not brought a lantern or a light with her, but even so her night vision seems to improve as she runs further and further up onto the hills. She has lost the path long ago, and relies on her inner sense of direction to lead her where she needs to be. Below her, in the valley where the river flows, the city sits squat and dark with few lights or fires burning. The good burghers are all asleep, having done their honest and hard day's work.

Magdalena trips and falls, then climbs onto her knees, feeling around her. Underneath her hands she finds a square stone, and patting her fingers forward, she finds a threshold, a doorframe, a door. She has found what she is looking for. She stands up, runs her hands over her clothes, and pushes her way into the hut. A small fire burns in the centre of the dirt floor, and a little pot bubbles happily on top of it. A small dog runs out from the shadows to greet her, jumping up on her dress and leaving muddy little paw marks.

‘Welcome, little sister,’ and old voice breathes. ‘We knew we would find you here tonight.’

‘You seek our help again,’ another voice rings through the room.

There is a silence. Magdalena looks around, but there is little to be seen in the darkness that falls outside the ring of firelight. 'Where is the other one?' she stammers.

'This is no work for the youngest amongst us,' the old voice says. 'Devana knows little of the way of the traveller, less still of the way of the fighting protector. She is not strong enough for this work.'

'What Morana says is true,' the second voice says.

'But what about *me*, then?' squeaks Magdalena. 'I know even less than *her*!'

There is a pause, and a certain glow spreads through the room. Magdalena feels a blankness fall over her, neither a love nor a hate nor a fear, but a flat nothingness. She shakes herself and it is gone.

'You have the ties needed to make the connections for our work,' is the answer. 'For love is stronger than death, and death is a mere transition between the worlds which cannot change love.'

'Mokoš, sometimes you are too strange even for me!' the old voice snaps. 'Surely that child within you is turning your head. Let us get to the work, for your inanity cannot do much but confuse us and ruin our clear sight!'

Magdalena giggles.

'Sit, little one, sit. Warm yourself by our little fire and smell the scent of the laughing herbs that brew there.' Magdalena sits down and shrugs off her cloak; the fire burns much hotter than she would have imagined. She settles herself, turning her limbs this way and that before she is comfortable, then notices the scent from the pot. She allows the musty, dried green smell to penetrate her, and she has the impression that the steam is curling right up into her head, irrigating her mind with a rich mulch.

She feels as though she is in the fields after second harvest, surveying the over-turned earth which is waiting in the heavy golden sunlight for a layer of humus to cover it.

The two older women begin to hum, and then to chant, but Magdalena cannot understand the words. Instead she lets the sound encircle her, and becomes relaxed. And suddenly she is walking in a dark place.

She is on a vast, dark plain, but it is not as an open place. The darkness above her seems to press down as does the darkness beneath her feet. She does not know why she can see in this darkness, but she notices that there is nothing to see. She wanders, not knowing if she is moving in a straight line or in a circle, until she sees, or rather feels, two dim lights near her. They seem to be eyes, and she knows that they are Morana and Mokoš. She moves on, feeling safer knowing that these two are with her.

Before her she sees two other lights, but they are straight columns of light, sharp light. She wills herself to move to them. The closer she comes near, the more she can see they both these lights are not columns but spirals, whirlwinds, and that one is turning upwards and the other down. She also notices that one is whiter than the other, which appears to have flecks of red whirling amongst it, like sharp little road stones, or drops of blood. Suddenly she is pulled by the action of the whirl, and she is sucked down and down until she feels herself captured in a square shape. Looking around her, she sees the dim outline of a room, but at the same time she can feel the hollow vastness of the first plain flowing through this space as well. She blinks and in front of her appears an old, old man, whose hands stutter with a palsy, and whose white robe shakes with the trembling of his body. 'Who are you,' she calls, but the old

man does not hear her, or appear to see her. He is waiting, and there are red stains shimmering on his robe.

‘Holy Mother,’ Magdalena’s heart cries. And she feels a heat approaching her from behind.

She turns and sees Regina walking towards her, and moves into her path. But her sister seems to walk through her and stand facing the old man. Magdalena shudders. ‘Regi, Regi,’ she cries, but Regina brushes her hand across her face as though she is brushing aside an insect. Magdalena falls to the floor of this space, feeling at the same time its solidness and the limitless hollow that stretches away from her. She sits still. And then realizes that the two eyes are with her, one on either side of her.

There is a rumble, and Regina opens her mouth. ‘What are you doing to me, old man?’ She is angry. ‘Why do you not leave me in peace?’

{ ‘It is you who have called me here now.’ }

‘I was asked to do so. I was told to ask you some questions.’

{ ‘Then do so, but know that you are distracting me from *my* purpose.’ }

‘What did you do in that room last night? Did you invite in another evil spirit?’

{ ‘Not I. It was the liberation of a soul from purgatory. I was forced to watch it and think upon my sins.’ }

‘Whose soul? What sins?’

{ ‘The soul of the Graf’s father. Yet one more rich man released by the money his family pay to free him. My sin? Murder and jealousy. Greed. I killed a man for his money. That which you must find to free me from this place.’ }

‘And if I refuse? For I want nothing to do with you. I have no part in your petty doings. It is nothing to do with me.’

{‘Then I will follow you in all your hours. And when death comes to claim you, you will be here with me until you finish the job.’}

Magdalena feels a great well of anger rise in her, sees its redness flow out of her body and merge with the red wave that is coming from Regina’s light, as well as the red tears that are flowing out from the two eyes on either side of her. There is a roar beginning somewhere and this too flows through the eternity of space. She notices that the old man sits and smiles, his hands trembling, the red flow of rage dividing and coursing around him rather than touching him at all. He raises his hands and farts, and a wind blows up and pushes the rage away from him. And then all is darkness once more and there is a whispering and the two columns of light disintegrate and Magdalena feels herself float down and above her body sitting at the fire in the little hut and suddenly with a great swallow she is within her body once more and opening her eyes.

She feels sick. She begins to wretch, but Mokoš springs forward and leans Magdalena’s slender body over until her forehead touches the earth, her palms flat on the ground, and she can feel all the tension and sickness within her seep out.

‘The nasty old man!’ Morana croaks. ‘I’d like to give him one!’ She shuffles over to a corner and steps into the light carrying a mug of cold water, which she gives to Magdalena.

‘I wonder how he got so strong,’ Mokoš muses, rubbing Magdalena’s back.

‘Maybe he just thinks he’s strong,’ Magdalena moans. ‘Maybe he’s just pretending. The boys at home would just bully one of us girls for no reason whatsoever, just to prove they were strong.’

‘Eh, and we here on earth think the spirits are so wise!’ the crone laughs, slapping her thighs. ‘I think you’re sister is far more powerful than it; we just need to let her know her strength, and then she can defeat it.’

Magdalena lies down and lets her cheek rest on the cool dirt floor. ‘I must return,’ she moans, ‘but I feel so ill.’

She closes her eyes and drifts into sleep. The two women look at each other, and one brings out a sheepskin to cover the sleeping girl. They both sit and watch her, and before dawn they rouse her, and still half asleep, bring her back into the walled city.

*

A great wind blows through the Graf’s little room. The student turns and turns to see if the door has suddenly come open, or if one of the little windows has loosened its latch, but the door is shut and the velvet drapes lie heavy and still. He begins to sweat.

Regina’s eyes fly open. She looks from one man’s face to the other. ‘Did you hear it?’ she asks. ‘Did you feel the wind?’

The Graf has turned pale. He looks at Regina and backs away from her. ‘What are you doing?’ he hisses, ‘what have you brought into my home?’ He crosses himself three or four times.

The student looks at him, a puzzled frown wrinkling his young forehead. He addresses Regina. 'We heard nothing, but we felt the wind. Did it appear to you?' A drop of perspiration falls from his temple, onto Regina's hand. She looks up at him and wipes the sweat away on her dress.

'He was here, he talked to me. He told me about the lights, that it was not him who made them shine, but the soul of your father, Sir, being taken from purgatory to heaven at last.'

The Graf falls to his knees and begins murmuring a prayer. 'And what of my mother?' he asks. 'Go back and ask him!'

The student clears his throat. 'Perhaps the young lady is tired now?' he mutters.

'And anyway, the spirit is gone. He is very angry with me.' Regina wipes the back of her neck and finds that it is wet, and that her hair draggles onto her shoulders.

'What of my mother?' the Graf moans.

The student shrugs his shoulders, turning more towards Regina. 'Why is the *spirit* angry with you?' he asks.

'I won't help him.'

Another gust of air blows through the room, a cold gust, and a loud moan rumbles through the house. Regina jumps to her feet, but stumbles, and a voice whispers in her ear, *Why are stumbling, little girl, why are your legs trembling? What have you been doing, and with whom?* She feels a hot breath by her face, and a wetness as though someone is licking her. She shrieks, and falls back into her chair. 'Didn't you hear him?' she screams, 'didn't you hear him?' She wipes and wipes at

the side of her face and already the skin is puckering into blisters that come away with her rubbing.

The Graf and the student can do nothing more than stare at her.

‘Something was here,’ the student whispers.

The Graf crosses himself again

*

Regina indulges in self-pity

From then, he was quite [against it], with undeceptive signs his greatest torment showed, also how he was a good spirit and indeed that's why he wanted to prove this; while he always urgently pleaded for this freedom, and with this state, without hesitation and finally, he would cease all his fluctuation. His appearances were noisier, his presence more serious, more oppressive. The sight of him confused the maiden, made her at times speechless, yes so even unconscious. [She fainted at the sight of him.] Many heard how he lugged chains after himself, or otherwise he would burn the doors, rattle the gates and make piteous noises, feeling sorry for himself and sighing.

With a fearful illusion/image the spirit begged that he would like to quiet the staff, and he could do so with his smallest finger if he felt generous. He touched the maiden on the right arm, so she felt it, and so immediately arose on the place [she felt on her arm] the touch of a leaf with a feeling that it would burn that part.

In proof, this mark stayed on her arm, which many of the staff saw. So that this mark would not be seen as witchcraft/devil's work, she pleaded that he make an image of the Holy Cross as a sign.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, pp109-110

So now, dearest Goddess, dearest, most

Holy Mother,

I have returned to this stinking room, I am confined here, they have stuck me
back here

because

of

nothing

The Howling

nothing

that they all can see now, but refuse to

see

Selfish beasts -

pigs - no, pigs are better creatures than these miserable drudges who won't
notice the hell that's playing out before their eyes, who are too afraid to talk, to go to
the Graf and tell him that

I am not bewitching them

It appears, it

appears

in the night and they can

feel

it, they can

hear

it, they can smell it and taste how it burns the wood in this household, the
doors and the doorframes, they can see the smoke of the burning but they

won't talk

they can hear his moaning, I know they can, they say it's the

wind, the wind, this heavenly child

and not the hellish

nothing

that will not leave me in

peace!

Let me

rest in peace, Holy

Mother! Dearest Goddess!

I swear, I swear, I will

honour-you-night-and-day-and-say-my-prayers-to-you-every-night-and-to-
fast-every-Saturday-and-to-only-ever-eat-cold-food-and-to-be-a-good-girl-and-work-
hard-day-and-night-and-night-and-day

only

save me Holy Mother, from this *nothing*.

Mother, where are you?¹⁶

I am

bored, this room

stinks, this room, it looks like it is becoming smaller and smaller with each
breath that I take, and I cannot still myself, I

will not

still myself. They have told the Graf that I am

the cause, the Good Graf whose

bookshelves are lined with learned tomes filled philosophy and religion, books
that can tell you everything you need to know about heaven and hell, and he lines his
library with students who can tell you everything you need to know about what's in
between. And

in front of their own eyes

they can see the

nothing

that blows their haughty thoughts into shreds with his clinking and moaning
and burning fury, and they

will not

see the damned thing!

¹⁶ The Holy Mother replies; Only *see* for yourself, my troubled one!

I must

escape I must

leave this room, this tomb before they

try me and

execute

me without my knowledge of it. I must try and reach them, tell them -

tell them what?

*

It is an ordinary work day and the household performs its duties in a tired silence. During the night there has been another fury, and many of the staff heard the noises, and felt the strong wind, some even could catch the scent of burning, although Stephan, on one of his many rounds of the palace, could detect no actual fire. Most of the staff are half asleep, having been unable to rest properly during the night. Many of them are impatient, cranky, and go about their tasks with the sense of tired rebellion in their chests. Almost all of them are relieved - in the spiteful way that can catch up with tiredness - that the aunt, the mistress of the staff, has confined Regina to her room indefinitely. They exchange few curt words amongst themselves, preferring rather to place their efforts into their work.

Despite the fact that the Graf and his family have left the palace for the summer house, no-one slackens in their grind, and the home sparkles in a perfection that no-one will appreciate. No-one mentions the disarray that the winds of the night have left, nor the scorch marks that appear on the walls, the small dents in the plaster

that line the corridors. These defects are tidied, whitewashed, patched up during the day in silence.

No-one gossips about their dreams, no lovelorn glances are thrown across the dining table, the usual indication of the scope of nocturnal activity. No-one mentions the occasional thud of kicking feet, or strangled rattling of the locked door of Regina's little room. No-one responds to the shouts they can hear once in a while from that place.

Magdalena goes about her work with a piece of the night's fury raging within her. She accuses the dust particles of all sorts of things as she sends them flying through the ornate rooms, attacking the books and the statues and picture-frames with her dust rag. But there comes a moment, just when she feels that her fury will overflow and she may throw down her dust-rag and leave the house forever, when she hears a voice within her.

Sister, help me. For the sake of the Holy Mother, help me!

Magdalena throws the rag down and tramples over it in her haste to run silently through the silent house whose only noises are the those of patching and mending and cleaning.

*

'Magdi, open this door'

'I cannot, I don't have the key,'

'I do not care, just open this door, for this silence is making me scream.'

‘How can I open the door without the key?’

‘Look for another way.’

‘Oh, keys be damned, they’ve boarded you in, Regi!’

‘I know. I heard them hammering yesterday.’

‘The Graf’s gone away, you know.’

‘Yes. They are afraid.’

‘Of you.’

‘Yes.’

‘Holy Mother, help us!’

‘Can you remember what happened to Oma -’

‘Don’t say such things, don’t even think them.’

‘They want a burning. The Graf has been listening to the students.’

Magdalena pulls at the board that is nailed across the door. She presses her fingers at the space between the board and the door, but it does not move. She closes her eyes and mutters something. On the other side Regina places her hands on the patch of wood where she can feel her sister’s heat. She closes her eyes and tries to catch the rhythm of Magdalena’s muttering. The two women stay in this position for a long time. Magdalena’s eyes open wide, she stamps her foot and cries, ‘If it’s witches they want, it’s witches they will get!’

There is a thud, and the board pulls away from the door. The rusty nails click softly on the stone floor.

Although it is still light, and the day windless, the entire household is disturbed by a piteous sigh that is heard throughout the entire palace in one single moment. The light drops into twilight, a minute movement that very few inside perceive, although all notice a cold wind rise and fall even in the rooms where the doors are shut. One by one, and in the silence of terror, all who have heard this great sigh creep into the servant's common kitchen, where there is always a fire burning, and company. No-one remarks on the gathering as each one tries to sit as close as possible to the hearth.

The door opens and Regina and her sister enter the room. Their aunt's eyes goggle open, but she does not say anything. There is no sound but the crackling of the wood burning in the fireplace. All faces turn towards Regina, and she can feel the gazes slide over her disheveled clothes, her greasy, lank hair, her patched shoes and falling stockings. She picks up one or two of the gazes and stares right back into the eyes of the gazer, but the connection is broken each time as the one looking drops the look, or closes the eyes and flushes, or turns away. Regina pulls herself up, her back straight, her hands on her hips, her heart beating.

'You traitors!' she screams, and the sounds rings through the room then is stopped by the continuing silence of the people.

A few pull at their clothes, slipping cloth away from neck, or pushing sleeves up towards elbows, rustling skirts and jackets. All continue to stare at Regina. Magdalena presses herself against the greasy wall, feeling as though the arches above her are about to close over her head like a night-flower. Her knees give way and she slides down to the ground, but no-one notices.

Another shudder runs through the room, and Regina's eyes roll up and she is jittering and her body twitches and it is as if she is being held up by some unseen force because her body is jerking and shaking so much it is impossible for her to stand naturally. Her mouth moves with unheard words, and Magdalena notices a drop of saliva gather at the corner of her sister's lips and she feels a small burn of embarrassment. Tremors are making waves of Regina's hair, and her hands claw at the air. Her clothes become wet with the perspiration that is flowing from her shaking body.

But no-one moves towards her, no-one touches her, or even stands from their seat. The fire in the grate vanishes, and the room is left in darkness. No-one moves, no-one moves despite the great heat that presses down on all of the people in the servant's common kitchen. A whispering begins and continues, a river of sound that trickles through the great heat spiralling through the room.

*

Magdalena feels a great rush, a great dizziness and she is standing once more on the vast, unending black plain where there is no ground and no sky and no substance. Before her she sees Regina, and her sister's body is a great blaze of light which is clutching and clutching at the old man that stands directly before her. But she cannot touch the old man, her arms seem to go right through the body and Regina's arms only clutch her self in a frustrated embrace. The old man glows, Magdalena notices his eyes elongate, his lips red and wet, his hands knotted, gnarled, the nails

long sharp. She becomes afraid. There is a leering laugh and Magdalena becomes terrified.

Regina clutches and clutches for the old man. 'What do you want of me?' she screams over and over again.

{ 'I could obliterate the whole of your house, just by raising my finger. With the smallest breath.' }

'Old man, get away from here. They have done you no harm. I have done you no harm. Get back to hell where you belong!'

{ 'Oh you stupid child! I am nor going back there. I have done my time, I confessed to the priests. I am clean.' }

'Then what are you doing here?'

{ Silence }

'Why do you persecute me?'

{ 'I enjoy your rage. How much rage will you have if I destroy all those here?' }

'Foul man! What have they done to you?'

{ 'They want to destroy you.' }

'A murderer in life, now you are a murderer in death too?'

{ 'You dare?' }

'I dare. I am plain enough to name it as it is.'

{ 'Then let them name you that which you fear the most.' }

Magdalena is so terrified that she opens her eyes and immediately is sick. When she had finished and has wiped her mouth and is still coughing, she notices that

Regina's jerking body is still holding the attention of all those in the kitchen. It is as if the powers of their gazes are holding her up. There is a burning smell pervading the room, and Magdalena notices that the right sleeve of her sister's dress is smouldering, and smoke is curling around her body.

The heat in the room increases, but no-one moves, no-one adjusts their clothing. There is a scorching sound, a hiss, and a great red welt appears on Regina's arm. The skin glows for a second.

Regina shrieks, her eyes open and she falls on the floor.

A great gust of cold air rushes through the room, and everyone therein blinks or rubs their eyes, looking around, stretching, murmuring as though it is morning and they have just awakened. After a while they notice the two girls on the floor, notice the great burn mark that is already blistering the skin on Regina's arm. Someone lights a lantern or a candle, bringing a cheery light into the room. But still no-one says a word until there is a hiss which forms itself around the word, '*witch*'.

Magdalena feels her stomach give way again. She pulls herself up, feeling all her movements to be slow, slower. She feels that she is riding on the gazes of all those in the room who are still seated, quiet as though they are in a theatre or in church. She moves to her sister on the floor, who is moaning and trying not to clutch at her burned arm. Magdalena manages to pull her up, and together they move out of the room, up the stairs, out of the palace, and out of the city's walls.

The city lies beneath the two girls climbing the hills. There seems to be a pall, an ugly fog resting on top of the city, an emission from the dwellings themselves, a layer of something ugly. The early evening lights seem to flicker on the underside of the cloud, turning it a sickly orange shade. Regina can just make out the spire of the largest church, its golden crown pokes into the cloud, hidden. Somewhere along the way the two girls come across a stream, and drink, and bathe, and Magdalena washes the taste of fear out of her mouth. She urges Regina to bathe the burn on her arm, but Regina refuses. She is trembling still, and will not speak.

‘Are you afraid?’

‘Stop entering my mind. They have accused us already.’

‘Yes, but are you afraid?’

‘No.’

‘Then what are you feeling? I cannot read you at all.’

‘That is, my lovely sister, because you do not understand rage.’

‘But I am coming to understand fear.’

‘I cannot stop you.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘No more. Leave me alone.’

Magdalena grunts. She splashes some more water on her face, shaking the icy droplets off her skin. In the distance there is a hoot, and Magdalena jumps. Regina does not.

‘Didn’t you hear that coming, little sister?’

‘No need to be nasty.’

‘Not nasty; I just wanted to show you how fear prevents you from listening.’

‘I am listening. I heard what they called you. Us!’

‘At least now we need not be so careful anymore.’

‘Are you insane? We need to get out of this mess, and convince them we are innocent!’

‘We are innocent. I am innocent. We are nothing compared to the hatred of that evil thing.’

‘I do not understand you. Come, let us find them.’

‘And how do you think they can help me? Us?’

‘Regina! They are cunning women. They know the Goddess. They can help!’

‘We must help ourselves.’

‘I don’t think so. A little outside advice never hurt anyone.’

‘That’s not what Oma Rosa’s patrons said when they came to take her away.’

Magdalena presses her lips together. ‘I don’t care what you think,’ she says and the words slip between the trees. ‘You are coming with me and that is the end of the matter.’

A cool wind blows and the rustle of the forest’s leaves are the only answer that Magdalena receives. She stands and dusts off her clothes, and begins walking. She hears the flap of a bird’s wings overhead as she weaves between the trees. Her feet step into layers of pine needles that rot scented on the ground, but she does not stumble. She walks and walks without looking behind herself, and when she senses

that she is approaching the low hut once more, she can feel the heat of Regina's burning anger close behind her.

Inside the hut the three shadowy figures cluster around Regina, examining her burn. Magdalena slumps down against the wall, exhausted. The little dog lies down next to her, its chin resting on her thigh, and she places her hand on its soft belly. Somehow a beaker of water appears next to her, but she is too tired to drink it. It is cool but it steams at the same time, fragrant with herbs.

The three women chatter together, Magdalena cannot make out the words.

'Such anger,' Regina is sighing. 'Such terrible, terrible anger. Holy Mother, who could have lived that way?'

The youngest woman, Devana, is patting a green-smelling paste on Regina's arm and she chants as she does so;

'Heal, little sister, heal,
the flower gives its life for you
and in the end you will
give
your life for the flower,
perfection, dearest Goddess,
holy and whole.'

Magdalena's eyes close, and she does not notice when someone slips a sheepskin over her.

Regina lies on the floor and the three other women sit around her. Carefully they spread her burned arm out and hover their hands above the scorched, blistered skin covered with green paste. As they breathe in silence, a space opens above their

heads, a space opens amongst them and through them, a space where there is no longer any individual body, no unique voice, only a rich dark gold light and the comforting whisper of a single heartbeat.

What do you say, Crone, about this? You who are closest to death?

I say it is a man's doing, a man's rage. This is power, this is ambition.

And what say you, Maiden, you who are furthest from death?

I say it is fear and anger and I do not want a part of it.

And what say you, little burned one, who has tasted this dead thing, and has entered into its realm?

I am anger. I am rage. I am plunged into this hellish realm without knowing the reason why.

There is no reason, there is no knowledge. It is time to stop creating a reason that only serves to confuse and harm you and limit the way you heal yourself.

Then how may I approach this thing? How may I free myself? Where is liberation? Where is the freedom of my soul?

In joy. In healing. In flowing with the current, not against it. With joy you can create anything of your world.

But I am anger.

Transmute anger into joy. It is all one. It is all in the belly of the Goddess. The Holy Mother touches you and your body is healed. Herein lies the secret of transmuting anger; heal from within. Go beyond what reason teaches you.

But I am rage.

Take from the little flower its secret. It contains no anger, only joy.

The women sit together until dawn. Regina opens her eyes only when a shaft of sunlight lights through the thin skin of her eyelids and her vision shifts from a comfortable dark into a painful red. She rubs her eyes, rolls onto her back, curls her knees in toward herself and stretches. She does not notice the dry, hard poultice falling away from her arm, only that her sister is still asleep under the sheepskin and that they are alone in the little hut. She looks up at the ceiling, noticing the cracked earth, the dust and cobweb filled corners, the damp, earthy smell of the place. She rolls onto her side and a stone juts into the space between her ribs. It is too much for her and she sits up.

Magdalena opens her mouth and yawns. Her breath is foul. 'What do you think?' she mutters through her clammy breath. 'Should we go back there?'

Regina smiles. 'Yes.'

'But they'll kill us, for sure.'

'If they ever decide to believe what they saw.'

There is a strange light in her eyes.

*

'Here you have', it said, 'what you demanded.'

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p110

Of course

they didn't notice us

slip back into the palace. Of

course

we came back and found

everything

in an uproar, patchwork still being done on the house where the *nothing* had scorched and crumbled away the walls, patchwork in the eyes of the household who all seemed to be trying to remember or forget something, patchwork on the untidy corners left in the dark when the Graf and his family go away but now they are

back

and the palace is sparkling like a clean chandelier in the sunlight, but it is only light, it is only on the

surface,

look and see how thin the smiles are on the faces, look and

see

the darkness that lies beneath all the surfaces, the burn marks underneath the whitewash, the chips of plaster lying in the cracks between the floorboards in the Graf's luxurious rooms.

And now here I wait

This wooden chair is hard, and the

back

is too straight, and I fear that if I kick my heels against the legs of this

chair

it will break.

It is so much unlike

home, so strange here, so

unreal

I do not fit in here amongst the

floorboards and the carpets and the velvet curtains, the fine glass and the lace

and the rows and rows of books on the walls that all speak of everything and yet
contain

nothing

within their covers. Even if I could read

all those fine words I would

not

I would like to take a book from the shelf and open it and see

what worlds lie inside it, but I dare

not

I wonder what the

Graf

wants with me? I imagine he must be very very

afraid; why does he not consult a

priest?

That would be the one to define

whether or not I should be tried as a

witch.

*

The door to the Graf's little room opens and the student stands in the doorway. Regina leans a little to the side and peers in beyond the student, she sees the Graf and another man clothed in the orange robes of the Jesuits. The student does not speak, but beckons to her to stand and enter the room. She does so, aware that her shoes are laced too tightly as she approaches the Graf. She drops in a little curtsy to him, then to the Jesuit as well. She stands before them, her hands clasped together in front of herself, feeling proud that she has managed to curtsy without falling over. She keeps her eyes downcast.

The Jesuit stares at her. He narrows his eyes as though he is looking for something specific about her.

‘Well?’ the Graf asks no-one in particular.

No-one replies.

Regina is aware of the three men watching her. The hair on the back of her neck prickles and she begins to perspire.

‘No distinct outwards marks,’ the Jesuit mumbles. ‘Is your devil here with you at the moment?’ he directs his harsh voice to Regina’s vicinity. He does not look at her.

‘For heaven’s sake, father!’ the Graf interjects. ‘Use a little logic! There is nothing in this room but four human beings, a little daylight and a lot of dust. I can see that the maid has been as lazy as usual.’ He drags a finger over the surface of a

shelf, snickering. 'I thought you Jesuits were less superstitious and more logical these days.'

The student rustles his clothes and coughs into his hand.

'From what your staff have told me, I am quite certain that she is possessed of a devil. Though who knows what your heretic staff think it is; what they described is quite clearly demonic possession.'

Regina begins to tremble. She can smell the sweat drying on her clothes, and the scent, mingled with the scents of old fears that have dried into her dress, begins to diffuse into the room. She holds her arms closer to her sides, but cannot stop the trembling.

'Is your devil here with you at the moment?' he asks at Regina once again.

'No,' she squeaks, then flushes.

'Do you mean to say that you *do* have a devil?' the jaw of the student drops as the Graf asks the question.

'No,' she squeaks again, but can say no more. Her voice has dried up in her throat.

'What do you mean, then?' The Jesuit says.

But Regina cannot speak. She opens and shuts her mouth.

'Come now, woman. There is no reason to be afraid,' the Graf smiles at Regina, who laughs suddenly. It is not a pleasant sound.

'Perhaps she is out of her wits only?' the student suggests.

'I do not think so,' The Graf murmurs. 'Remember what we saw on Ash Wednesday, remember that she said it was the liberation of my father's soul from purgatory.' He crosses himself.

‘What did you see?’ the Jesuit turns to the student, his eyebrows raised.

The student blushes. ‘I did not see anything, but the Graf, his family, and the entire household saw something that night. We do not know what *she* had to do with it, but we do know that she was possessed of something last night again and the entire staff saw it.’

The priest leans forward and eyes the space around Regina. He wrinkles his nose and sits back in his seat again. ‘I shall have to consult the books further,’ he finally says. ‘I can do nothing here today.’

‘But surely we should test her, or something? We as men of science and logic must take every opportunity to prove out our theories?’ the Graf turns to the student, who nods.

‘We are not dealing here with a scientific theory, gentlemen,’ the Jesuit says. His mouth is tight. ‘We are dealing with the very enemy of our immortal souls. Surely you must feel the evil that emanates from this creature.’ The student snickers, then looks to the floor as the priest turns towards him. ‘We must eradicate whatever it is that is tainting your household, Herr Graf,’ he continues, his tone stentorian. ‘For surely it is a sin to be in the presence of such evil, and try to pin it down and magnify it so that it can continue its hellish work in the world. We must destroy it as soon as is possible. In the name of the Father!’ He crosses himself, and the other two men cross themselves as well, although the student keeps looking at the floor.

Regina faints.

When she comes too it is to drops of water falling on her face. The student holds a goblet in one hand and is sprinkling her face with the cool liquid.

‘The Graf is showing the priest out,’ he says, flicking and flicking with his fingers.

Regina does not say anything. She allows the water to fall on her skin.

‘I think he is being somewhat too nervous,’ the student continues. ‘The priest, that is. The Graf and I want you to ask this *thing* - if it truly exists - some questions.’

Regina now turns her head and stares at the student. She is unsure as to how she should feel. She reaches out and grasps his hand to stop the water falling on her face. The student gawps at her and then extricates his hand from hers and moves away from the day-couch on which she lies.

‘Personally,’ he moves to the window and looks out onto the street, his back towards her, ‘I don’t believe a word of what the servants say, nor the Graf himself. I believe that the phenomenon of witchcraft has more to do with insanity than with anything mystical.’ He turns, and smiles at her. ‘However in your condition, you will not understand what that means. You know nothing of the intellectual world, I expect.’

Regina has the dark desire to laugh again. A mad thought enters her mind; what if she were to take off all her clothes and run naked through the city, into the forests, and dance there amongst the mushrooms and the squirrels, bears and wolves? She narrows her eyes until they close and begins to hum. She has a feeling this will disturb the finely dressed student, and this is another thought that pleases her at the moment.

He frowns, and paces along the length of the couch, observing her yet keeping a distance between himself and her. A giggle wells up within Regina's belly, but she does not give it voice. She varies her rasping hum instead.

The sound of steps is heard and the door swings open and the Graf enters the room once more.

*

And so

they want me to *talk* to my

nothing, they want me to

speak to it on

command, they can tell me to

conjure it up just like

that -

they want me to

expose

myself to it as though

they were sending me to buy cheese or

bread,

and the shop were only a mile

down the road from here.

they want me to

work

for them, these

men of science, they want me to

open myself and allow that

nothing

to come through me as though my body did not matter, as though

I could not be

destroyed

at the slightest whim or the slightest

resistance

perhaps

I should show them my

arm

perhaps but see and look how well

the scar is already healing

perhaps

I could call in the men

who still stink of the grave,

who still have the smell of the

blood

upon them

but no-one want to go

near them

Oh Holy Mother - these

men, they

require me to expose myself to

it

and yet and yet nothing I can do

- and I can do

nothing -

will make them

see

through the void filled with their own self-importance into the

true void

where

nothing exists

*

After nothing materializes in the Graf's little room, Regina is dismissed and sent back down to the laundry. The desire to laugh still lies deep within her. But there is also deep within her a desire to cry, and the mingled senses produce a confusion, a little hollow at her centre which seems to revolve inside her belly. She keeps her eyes

down. Moving down the staircase from the lush upper rooms to the basement rooms where her work is, she senses a darkness come over her, and she feels that the ancient stone walls are beginning to encase her. Already a part of the newly built wall has become damp and is crumbling, and underneath this wall there are neat piles of flat stones, as though some ancient people had pre-ordained the palace and had built a foundation for it.

Regina feels as though someone or something is throwing a grey veil over her head that reaches the length of her body to the floor. At once she feels encumbered and protected, removed from the world, at the same time. The veil is a barrier that seems to encase her and close her off, and she does not know if she should feel grateful or hateful or whether she should laugh her fancy off as the mere darkness of the rooms where the light cannot reach. She begins to feel blank. She conceives the feeling that she is moving slowly, that her body is moving through water or fog and that her limbs are no longer swift or clumsy. She does not know what to feel, and she walks with this sensation swinging her body.

It is a long moment before she reaches the door of the laundry and pushes it open. The faces of her aunt and her sister turn towards her but she cannot see the expressions, nor really recognize the visages. She does not think, nor does she sense anything, and she moves through the damp and hot air in the laundry to the board which is used for pressing linens with the heated flat-iron.

Holy Mother, help me, this is truly

nothing

The heat rises in the room but she cannot see her aunt or her sister tug at their clothes, loosening bands, pushing up sleeves, tucking skirt edges away from legs. She lifts her hand and brushes away at her hair but cannot sense any relief. A weight settles upon her chest and around her head, but she cannot tell from where it comes, only that it has something to do with the oppressive little room and the enveloping walls that curve into the damp stone ceilings above her head. Steam rises and forms water on the stone, little hot droplets that fall onto the washed linen, the women, the tables and the floor. Regina cannot hear the sounds of the water falling. She is listening to the voices in her head, but they have abandoned her for the moment and the stillness within her own self is unsettling her even further.

?????

The heat rises even further. Magdalena and the aunt stop their work for a moment, and the aunt, her hands pressed to her temples, leaves the room. Magdalena turns to Regina, who is leaning on the ironing board, supporting herself with both hands.

Nothing

Magdalena stares at her sister.

{‘And you believe yourself to be in agony.’}

‘Nothing.

‘There must be something. There cannot be

‘nothing’

{‘There is pain. There is hatred. There is loathing.’}

‘What do you loath? What do you hate?

‘I hate this

‘nothing.’

{‘There you too hate me as I hate myself.’}

‘Free yourself.’

{‘I cannot.’}

‘You must. I cannot free you.’

{‘You must.’}

‘I am in agony. And yet I know I must

‘free myself

‘from this agony I could

‘choose to ignore you but I have

‘not yet my ignorance would not free

‘you - that

‘is your task for your

self.’

{‘You know nothing of agony. Let me show you agony.’}

The heat rises. In space between Regina’s hands there is smoke, and then there is a flame, and Magdalena cannot move but she can see the linen burning on the ironing board and the flames leap up at Regina’s face. The nutty smell of scorched

cotton rises around the two women, and Magdalena has the sense that she can see a third hand somewhere in the vicinity of her sister's chest. The hand is pushing, pushing down into the flames, which leap away from the touch, rising higher and higher over Regina.

There is a great noise, a crack, and Magdalena sees the flame leap up at the wall, a wave breaking over her immobile sister. Through the heatwaves and the orange fire Magdalena sees her sister covering from crown to foot with a grey shroud-like veil, the ripples of flame licking around her but not touching her. The linen in front of Regina is turning black and vanishing but Magdalena is too far away to see anything except the white smoke of scorching rising between Regina's hands which do not move away from the conflagration.

Magdalena has a sense that she is in hell, and for a moment the world around her turns black. But when the cool comes, when the air blows cold through the room, she regains her senses and notices that her sister has fallen down again in a dead faint, small spasms rippling through her otherwise immobile body. She is muttering in a voice that is not her own, *No more, no more.*

*

Therefore the Bishop ordered that more priests hold a nightwatch next door to the maiden's room so that they might exactly observe the moment that the spirit cared to appear.

They were four ordained men from diverse cloisters, then a priest from the honorable Graner capital, and also more.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p115

Holy Mother, I

hate

them all.

Gathered around my door, gathered like

dogs in heat, they slaver,

waiting, waiting,

for me to

carry out

their wishes, and they wish to observe, to

see

with their own eyes this nothingness.

Listen to them mutter. I cannot hear what they say to each other.

Three times Magdi has approached them, I

heard her, her voice is so

loud

three times she wanted to see me, to

speak to me,

and I wanted her to hold my hand

I feel so ill -

and my skin

burns, and I want the healing herbs

pressed against my bare chest and my face and my neck, and instead they

smear

pig fat

on my skin and I stink even more than this room does, I feel so

ill

If only I could be at peace, if only my thoughts

were silent;

if only I were

dead

then I might be free of all this -

Holy Mother, it is a sin but

let me

die¹⁷

Listen -

here is Magdi again; I wish I could hear what she says but she sounds very

angry.

If only I could feel that too. Maybe the anger would

burn

more than my skin

¹⁷ The Holy Mother turns away from this request, smiling.

and I could leap from this room and run away, far
away, back home, back to my
mother's house,
back to the night sounds of the house and not this ceaseless
mutter of
men's voices

If only I was not so tired I
could stand up and
say something; listen
the door slams, and the muttering
continues, Magdi is gone,
gone
and I must wait for something to happen so that I might justify
my life

*

It is eleven o'clock when the priests are shocked by an enormous noise, the rattling of the house gate outside. They jump in their seats as one, and stare at each other before one of them creeps to the window and peers out. But it is dark and nothing can be seen through the thick, warped glass panes. One by one they stand, some look into another's face, some do not look anywhere except at the door that is contains Regina's tiny room. One or two of the candles that are lit for their vigil

extinguish, but none of them notice; or perhaps not one of them wishes to give in to the superstition and candles that extinguish for no foreseeable reason. They make up a *corps* of rationality, these men. They are a collective of logic, each one a limb, a branch of reasoned argument and therefore a reliable observer. Each one has quelled - through rigorous training - that instinctive piece of himself that allows the *frisson* of dread, or expectation, to ripple through the gut.

Without looking at anyone else, the man who has been to the window brushes through the still bodies and pushes open the door to Regina's room. He is a strong man, and the door crashes against the wall, almost closing back on itself. The others gather around him and vie to push the door back open. They hang back, unwilling to enter the dark and stinking little room.

A gust of damp air wafts out at them. It is hot, and one or two reach up and tug at their collars, some of the others scrabble in their pockets for cloth to hold up to their noses against the stink.

'Can you hear something?' one of them whispers. There is a silence amongst them.

'Yes,'

'No,'

'Be still, let me listen!'

'I can't hear a thing!'

'Yes, yes, something is muttering. Can you not hear it?'

They file into the room one by one and stand around Regina's bed. In the dark they cannot see her burned face, which is already beginning to blister and ooze around the chin.

‘I am *certain* someone is saying something!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. There is nothing to hear except the girl’s breathing.’

‘Should we not, then, leave her alone? After all, there is nothing to see here.’

‘Yes, let us leave.’

‘No, no! Listen. I am sure the devil is at work here.’

One of them holds a candle up.

‘And look, see how she twitches with palsy.’

‘Her legs, as well as her hands!’

He is coming, he is coming

The men gather closer around Regina’s bed. One or two of them hang back, but soon press themselves closer to the backs of the others who form the circle around her. They peer between the shoulders of the others. Most of them clench their fists and hold their bodies as rigid as possible to hide the shudder within from his neighbour.

‘Old man, what do you want now?’

{‘Who are all these men?’}

‘The priests who have come to see you. And to see me.’

{‘Why?’}

‘To judge me. Why else? They want to know if you are real.’

{‘I cannot speak to them.’}

‘I will not speak to them.’

{‘Stupid girl.’}

‘You must. You must show them something. Otherwise -’

{‘Otherwise what?’}

‘I cannot say it. Otherwise they will -’

{‘Ah, girl, I see your fear.’}

‘Leave me be,’

{‘Oh no, that would be too easy. It is your fear that feeds me.’}

‘Why don’t you speak to them? Why don’t you just let me be in peace?’

{‘I cannot speak to them. They would not hear me. It is a pity. I can feel a little fear from them, but something hard and cold stops the fear from swallowing them. How sad!’}

‘Do something! End this! I am so sick, so tired! I cannot do anymore for you!’

{‘You have done nothing for me.’}

The room grows warmer and warmer. The men separate a little from each other, uncomfortable in their thick woolen cassocks. The candle’s glow appear to brighten, casting a warm light further up the walls. Together, they stare at Regina, whose body now is also rigid, her hands and legs stiff, her back arched, her eyes rolled back in their sockets. Her mouth is moving but no sound comes from her throat. A few of the men step back, crossing themselves.

‘She is possessed!’ someone whispers.

‘No, she is merely mad. We must call an apothecary.’

‘Wait, wait! I have something!’

From a pocket somewhere, one of the men produces a small vial, which is uncorked. 'Holy water!' the whisper ripples through the room. 'Now we will see if the devil possesses the witch.'

'Foul!'

'Unclean!'

The vial is passed from hand to hand and each man sprinkles a little water over himself. By the time this has passed through the circle there is almost no water left. The vial is upended over the bed, but none of the droplets of water fall on Regina, who is rolling from side to side now, clutching at the sheets.

A chime rings through the room, and one man jumps, causing the others around him to start as well. The bells of the nearby cathedral are tolling the hour, and as each peal rings through the room, the glow of the candle rises, and soon the men are staring open-mouthed as the room appears to fill with flames.

{ 'See, I can yet show myself to them! I can yet free myself from this hell!' }

Regina moans.

{ 'Ah, the fear rises in them! I will show them a sign yet!' }

The empty vial falls to the floor and crashes.

{ 'Oh see how heavy my pains are! It is a pity I cannot talk to you, men of God!' }

The heat rises in one last flash as the last peal from the bell courses through the room. One of the men is transfixed, his mouth open, his hands clasped together. And then the room is cold, the little light from the candle casting long shadows on the walls and floor, and over Regina, whose body is now relaxed and still. The men look at each other. No one is willing to speak until in the darkness a voice whispers, 'I saw it.'

Regina's eyes flutter open with these words. But the men are crowding around the one who has just spoken, and in a tide of eager questions, usher him out of the room.

Regina sits up in bed, despite the aching of her skin, beats her fists down on the sheets, and bursts into angry tears.

*

money

Listen to them, murmuring

outside

my

door,

mutter mutter mutter, these nuns are so timid;

compared to the rumble of the priests.

I don't want

to go out there, to part the seas of prayers that are leaving their lips,

I don't want to go through that, Holy Mother, how do I get

out of here?

See, I kneel before You, You

are the only thing they have left me for comfort, and

You are still only made of wood, I

know

that You are not there, but here, within

me, with

me;

I know that poor tree has been cut down, and whittled, and carved, and painted

and lacquered

until there is nothing of the

life

of You in that lovely but strange

piece of not-wood.

Not that Your image is unlovely to me.

I watch You as You cradle the head of Your dead son and I can feel

how You love -

I wonder what tenderness made the carver shape Your hand just so, Your

mouth so sad, the way Your shoulders

droop, all hope

streaming out of You with Your

fingertips.

But my situation is different at this moment. I am not sure I can ask
such a sad face of You, Dearest Mother,
for the miracle that I need right now to get me out of this mess.
Your image is too tragic, too
involved
in Your own sorrow
for me to place my troubles at Your feet.

Though I am desperate to.

*

There is a knock on the door and Magdalena enters; behind her a flurry of black veils and pale faces peer into the room, but Magdalena shuts the door, repulsing the tide of gazes that are try to follow her in. Regina is sitting up in her bed, facing the small carved pieta that sits on a three-legged stool in the corner of the room.

‘How can you stand the smell in here?’ Magdalena says, her nose wrinkled.

‘It’s better than being *looked at* by all of them out there!’ Regina falls back on her pillows. ‘What are they thinking, for heaven’s sake?’

‘They are thinking that some sort of miracle is going on because that one priest said he saw the thing.’

‘Oh, so it’s a miracle now, is it? Am I still a witch?’

‘SSsssshhhh! Regi! Don’t even say the word! Let it be a miracle and everyone will forget about us!’

There is a silence between the sisters, although the stream of murmuring from outside fills the space with an uncomfortable trickle. The moment stretches out before the two girls, wrapping them in a silence beneath the nuns' chatter. It is an uncomfortable silence, filled with the possibilities of myriad of doubts, fears, and consequences too dangerous to be named.

Regina closes her eyes and leans back on her thin pillow.

Holy Mother, Holy Mother she chants to herself. Eventually her inner chant falls into time with the whispering of the nuns gathered outside her door, and in her head, the sounds merge and become a tide that moves with the beating of her heart.

Holy Mother, Holy Mother. The silent sound lulls her.

Magdalena shuffles on the bed next to her.

Regina sighs, but her stream continues; *Holy Mother, Holy Mother.* She allows the rocking of her sister's body on the bed to caress her as she moves with the movement of the straw mattress beneath her.

Holy Mother, Holy Mother. Don't move so much!

The thought drifts away in her silent stream, but the bouncing by her side does not. A small burn begins through her chant, somewhere in the region of her chest.

Holy Mother, Holy Mother, she continues, but the words no longer soothe her, no longer allow her to begin to drift into the place where she is safe. Instead her chant takes on a hard edge, a little growl. Her eyelids are heavy, but not heavy enough to resist the flashes of colour that seep in as her eyes flicker open and shut.

Holy Mother, Holy Mother - That's IT! she shrieks within, as Magdalena's body turns from shifting from side to side to outright bouncing up and down.

‘WHAT in the NAME of ALL that’s HOLY do you think you’re DOING??’
she shouts between her clenched teeth.

Magdalena springs up off the bed and lands softly before the little wooden statue of the Mother holding Her dead Son that sits in front of them. She points at it, her finger shaking. ‘What’s that?’ she whispers.

Regina turns her head. ‘What’s what?’ she grumbles.

‘Look, you silly cow, there, beneath your statue.’

Regina heaves herself up. Her hair tumbles over her eyes and she pushes it away, dragging her fingernails over her skin. She pushes herself from the bed, her legs weak, and lurches from the bed to the floor, kneeling in front of her poor altar. Her hand reaches out, hovers, but does not touch the thing that has appeared on the stool.

‘What it is?’ Magdalena whispers behind her.

Regina snatches her hand away and holds it in the small of her back.

‘It’s a purse.’ She says. Her voice is low and very steady. ‘And it looks as though it has a great deal of money in it.’

Magdalena’s throat lets out a ragged, dry moan. She falls back, misses the bed, and lands on the floor. She covers her eyes with her hands. ‘Oh God,’ she chokes. ‘What are they going to think of us now?’

Regina stands, and returns to her bed. She pulls back the thin, damp wool coverlet, places her body on the sheet that covers the straws poking out of the hessian, and lies back, pulling the coverlet over her head.

Of the statue the spirit said; It pleases him and he exhorted the maiden that she should on the following Friday rise out of bed (she was sick), and take the vesper picture to the church - He would also show her, that on that day he predicts that the night would be very difficult for her.

The 26th of June was approaching dusk. On the night of Ladislaus, King of Hungary, the night-watch appeared, partly of the priests, partly of the secular, all together approximately 18 in total. They waited by the door of the maiden's room.

Suddenly, at 11 o'clock, one heard a noise, a crash, similar to the ignited gunpowder. None of those present doubted the reality of spirits.

They stepped in also, but however the maiden begged them to, they wanted to yield back a little, until she asked something of the spirit.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p117

Magdalena lies on the floor. What light that enters the room from the tiny high window is fading. Regina, beneath the covers of her bed, lies motionless. The purse squats before the little wooden piéta, a dark leather pouch, a small cyst that, unseen, still is a sore point in the already painful confines of the little room. The murmuring of prayer from outside the room flows on and on without rest. It disturbs the rhythm of silence that is trying to survive between the two sisters. The light fades, and fades more although neither girl is aware of the moment that is the threshold between grey and dark. At some point there is a knock on the door, a hint of the scent of food, but the call to open remains unanswered. The knocking is repeated at intervals. Neither Regina nor Magdalena really hears the sound.

Magdalena senses nothing.

Regina is far away

Holy Mother, this

is too much, too

much, too

far, too

deep into a world I

will not

go into.

Do you know, Holy Mother,

that I may now be a

thief?

Why have You sent this to me?

Or, if not You,

who? How can this

money

come from nothing?

How can that

thing

have found what I could not? How did

it

bring it here? And if that

evil old man

is the cause of this, why

Holy Mother

have I been put through this

hell?

How am I going to explain this to the

men?

I feel sick

I am sick

what's that

noise?

Holy Mother, not the

priests again. Why must I open myself up to them? Why must they cut me open and try to peer into me, to poke and to prod into my soul as though it were for sale, a pig at the market, a chicken, a goat even - why must I hold myself up to them and pretend that I am a poor and sick little maiden, that I must tell them my soul is in peril and that I place my self into their care?

It has not worked for me yet, it has not

led me out of this

fearful torment, it has not sent that

nothing

away from me, that leering and stupid old man,
he still is here, and he will be
coming again.

Holy Mother,
why can I not be the
caretaker
of my own soul?

Holy Mother, just You and

I

{‘And I!’}

*

Outside the room there is a shout, a chorus of male voices exclaiming. One rises above the rest; ‘I *heard* it! Did you not hear it brothers? An almighty crash, like lit gunpowder. Truly, did you not *hear* it yourselves?’ Above the sound of the voices, the clock is striking eleven. The pulse of the bell takes the chaos of the many voices and turns it into an ordered stream, a flow and ebb of prayer, a tenor and bass that loses some of its harmony when the clock stops striking its soprano chime.

One of the men steps forward and opens the door in a manner that the nuns could never have achieved. The door swings open, crashes against the wall and allows lamp light into the dark space. It falls on the wool-covered lump in the bed that is Regina. She flings back the covers and sits up. Magdalena, still on the floor, rouses herself and crawls on her bottom out of the light.

Regina's eyes are terrible. The flesh on her face is red and blistering, even above the green of the fading bruises. The men stop, unable to approach her. Someone pushes from behind, wanting to come inside the dark space, shoving through the press of bodies, but the two or three at the front cannot bend to the force of the attack. Something is holding them back from falling into the dark space. The two men in front start forward, but their bodies cannot fall into it. They jerk back and their faces show their fear. They cannot step back, the crowd behind them holds them in place.

There is another silence, one of a strange quality, as though the silence of the dark room is somehow thicker, or thinner, than that of the men's silence. A divided silence.

To them men, it appears that Regina pulls herself up. She raises her arm and points at them. Although her eyes are narrowed they can see her brown pupils darken, even in the dim light.

'Get out,' she growls at them. 'Can you not leave me in peace?'

A ripple spreads through the body made up of the men, and loosens the press so that those in the back skitter away, allowing those in the middle to disperse. The two men in the front are last, and the last man must reach inside to take the door handle. He slams the door shut, and the light is extinguished in the dark room.

And so, here I am, alone and in the
dark
yet again.

They have left me alone

again

in the dark,

although I must admit I feel far safer here, wrapped up by the

dark

then when they come in and stare and stare and stare and when they are not staring at me they gather together and turn their backs on me and talk amongst

themselves as if I did not exist, as if their words outdo life itself. Each one is better

than the other - their talk

reminds me of the woodcutters at home, when they talk each one has chopped down a greater trunk than the one before him - these men;

each one knows God and Spirit better and deeper than the last one and

Holy Mother

not a one of them knows

You

and already I can feel the presence of

it

I have only to be left alone in the

dark

and *it* swallows the darkness and surrounds me in *nothing* and

attempts to swallow me up, limb by limb.

I am becoming tired

of

it.

{‘Stupid child, are you bored with *me?*’}

Yes. I say it

yes -

and Yes again.

{‘After all the effort I have shown you, giving you signs, appearing to you,
you are *bored?*’}

Old man you have

hurt

me

{‘But the power I have shown! The lengths I have gone to!’}

And for

what?

See, you have provided for yourself the

money

which you begged me to find, and which I could not, and for that

you beat me and burned me and had me suspected for

devil’s work

and all the time

you

had the money,

you

knew where it was,

you

almost killed me - you

cannot see my pain

{‘You useless chit, you do not see *my* pain!’}

Old man! Old

man!

How

dare

you!?

{‘I have the angels of the Lord behind me, and you have *nothing*, you stupid girl.’}

Holy Mother, Holy Mother,

help me, help me, help me overcome my

rage, for surely I will burn something as surely as this

evil *nothing*

burned

me

{‘Oh, and you think you are hot. It is as a raindrop to my own howling hell.’}

Old man, you

nothing, you claim you are in

torment -

but you seem to enjoy it, you

boast

of it so much.

Well then, I condemn you

to return

to whence you came . . .

Leave

me

since I am so worthless to

you

I will have

nothing

more to do with

you

{‘You can never be rid of me.’}

Let me stretch
my arm above my head, let me
feel my toes, for I
have been in this bed
for too long.
My body aches -

How good it is to
move! How good
it is to feel my limbs
stir the
air, it is as if I was in a
muddy river, this air in here is so
thick -

{‘Listen to me. Listen!’}

Holy Mother, how
wonderful it is
to be fully
in my body, to move my back and my legs.
If I take this dirty old sheet away from myself
I am

free

{‘Chit, you are being childish . . .’}

Tomorrow I will

go

from here, go from this city of

stone and soot, of

shouting merchants and

sullen burghers, and climb

the hills behind the city, go into the

trees once more, feel my body

sweat and ache and

work

for me again.

{‘Child, listen to me! *Listen to me!*’}

Holy Mother, how

glorious, You have brought me back

from

nothing

to

everything

{‘Please, child, be good. Be quiet! Listen to me, for I know more than you can ever know. Do you what to know what I know?’}

*

Then he took a consecrated candle from the small altar and stood the same suitably in the wound of the right foot [footnote - the Latin text says: DENIQ UE CEREUM BENEDICTUM EX ALTARIOLO ACCEPTUM IN CHRISTI PEDE DEXTERO, UB I VULNUS HIAT, APTE COMPOSIT; and finally a blessed wax candle taken from the altar is {should be} placed into the Christ’s right foot when {into the spot placed} is the open wound.]

Thereupon he admonished the maiden, that she should be good and quiet in spirit, for on the next Saturday (now it was Thursday) would he appear in no frightening form, but in that of a white dove. While this proceeded in front of the maiden on the little room., the priests waited outside - now with burning, consecrated candles they stepped into the room and beheld straight away . . . the wax candle that with great devotion decorated wooden statue of the pain of the Mother of God . . .

They became courageous, they tried to step in, the spirit forbade it and roared with fright when they came. ‘I thank all those who gave me this help, they preserve from me and from God the reward.’

They sought to step in again, and he frightened them back again; ‘No-one steps in before the 12th hour!’

They turned also back to praying.

Meanwhile they heard the purse in which the 1200 florins were, that laid under the statue on the chest on which they found it, heavily hit and fall between the two sisters Regina and Magdalena. Regina fell into a two hour long faint, Magdalena was so strongly shocked that she almost lost her senses. So soon as the 12th hour struck there was by this time the entrance to the room forbidden, the maiden, asked the priest 'whether it yet allowed is, to come in!' 'Yes, Sir!' was the answer.

Then came the Friday that the spirit to the statue transfigured definitely.

The maiden stayed completely exhausted in her bed. The statue was with permission of the archbishop transported to the cathedral, for a solemn high mass to the dead was to be sung, the consecrated candles would be lit, alms would be distributed, there would be a great quantity of the devout going.

Well followed the Saturday, the day of Rest, which the spirit foretold. It was the 28th of June 1642.

Narration Rei Admirabilis, pp119-121

Regina begins to laugh. The sound bubbles from her lips, a stream of sound that is out of place in the thick-aired room. She swings herself over the side of the bed and fumbles in the dark. There is a tiny scratch as she lights a tinder, and she reaches under her bed, pulls out a candle, and lights it. She places the little candle in the red-painted wound of Christ's foot, and it illuminates the wooden faces of Mother and Son.

Regina smiles. She whispers, *Holy Mother, thank you*, and stretches her entire body up in one long, sinuous motion until she stands on her toes, her hair tumbling down her back.

Behind her there is a shuffling sound. It is Magdalena. She sits up and rubs her eyes.

‘He’s gone, isn’t he?’ she mutters. Her voice is thick.

‘Yes,’ Regina laughs. ‘Yes. He’s gone.’

‘What happens now?’

‘It does not matter.’

Magdalena takes a deep, deep breath. ‘I could feel him, I could almost see him, but I couldn’t hear him.’

‘It did not have anything useful to say. It is but a confused spirit.’

‘Will he bother us again?’

‘Not if you close your soul to it. We are alive, and so much stronger than any disordered soul, wandering about to find someone to disturb. It just wanted to show that its power had not diminished.’

There is a rattle on the door, and Magdalena starts. Regina composes herself, sitting up on the bed with her hands folded in her lap. One man’s loud voice rises above the general murmur. ‘But I heard it again! It was here again! We *must* see it!’

Magdalena shouts, ‘There is nothing here! Leave us alone!’

Regina sits on the bed, her face is raised to the group of men crowding at her doorway. The first man points at the candle in the Son’s foot and cries, ‘A miracle! The spirit put the candle in the foot of Our Lord! He must have!’

Magdalena stares at her sister, who does not say anything.

From deep within the house, a clock strikes quarter to the hour. Magdalena begins to whimper, and the first of the shouting men turns pale. Regina's eyes are closed. A wind blows up and pushes the door shut. Someone on the other side rattles the handle but despite the efforts of the strongest of the men, they cannot open the door.

Despite the thick wood between the young women and the men, they can still hear the silence of fear on the other side of the door.

'He has returned, hasn't he,' Magdalena moans.

{ 'Take this damned money and transport me from this damned hell!' }

Regina says nothing.

The purse that has been sitting on the little altar rises and is flung towards her. It lands on her temple close to her eye, the thick coins inside clinking together as they hit her flesh and bone. Regina falls back on her bed whilst Magdalena begins screaming.

When the clock strikes midnight, the door's handle uncatches itself and the door swings wide open. The men enter and find the two women, one senseless, and one unable to stop screaming.

*

A Lady reached the maiden, who claimed that the spirit in the form of a white dove would be present, and to honour the holiest trinity, she would make an offering

of three pieces of bread. It fell to Regina herself to take a share, the rest the others present.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p122

Although it is midday, and although the sun shines around the city of Poszony, or Pressburg as some call it, and although this same sun heats the stones of the Graf von Pálffy's palace, Regina is not warm. She lies in Magdalena's little bed next to the shivering form of her sister.

Magdalena has stopped screaming, but her body cannot cease its shuddering. She lies without speaking, staring at the roof above her.

Tante walks into the room, a tray in her hands. Her mouth is set in a thin, straight line. She puts the tray down on the battered little trunk that Magdalena keeps her clothes in. Liquid slops out of the two bowls on the tray. She begins to mutter. 'Lazy good for nothing - wasting the Graf's money - wasting my time - didn't my brother teach you any better - lazy man - too lazy to discipline his own - all this nonsense - all these heretics - priests - *devil's work* - what other sins am I to be punished for - not in this life - ingrates - after all my kindness - my hard work to get you two - *slatterns* - mixing with God only knows who - *priests* - all this extra work to feed -' She stands at the foot of the bed, her hands on her hips and stares at the two small women huddled close together. 'Get out of bed and stop *pretending!*' she shouts at them before turning around and leaving, slamming the door behind her.

Something approaching laughter ripples through Regina's body. Magdalena continues her shuddering. The sisters lie silent together and the light from the window traces a line over the floor as the afternoon passes. At some point the door

opens and a young priest steps into the room. He keeps his eyes away from the sisters, shuffling through the room. He opens the inner door and chokes as the stench from the darkness wafts out over him. But he arranges the edge of his sleeve over his nose, walks in, and walks out again carrying the carved pieta under one arm. As soon as he closes the door behind him, and takes the cloth from this face, he sighs and cradles the statue as though it were a child. The candle falls out from its place in the wound of Christ's foot.

The young man looks terrified, but he bends down quickly and picks the candle up, stuffing it back in its place before exiting the room. He does not take any notice of either Regina or Magdalena.

The entire incident makes Regina's eyes fill with tears and her body feel heavy.

Soon she notices that Magdalena has stopped shivering, that her sister is asleep. The smooth rhythm of the sleeper's breathing soothes her, and she lets her head relax back onto the pillow as she stares at the dark wooden beams of the ceiling above her. She falls into a light doze.

And as her mind drifts she finds herself in the little hut that springs from the dark earth behind the city, the floor hard packed dirt, a fire pit in the centre glowing with embers, a small dog snoozing in the corner chasing rabbits in its dream. What begins as a tiny glow above the dark red fire pit expands and grows through the room, a bright white light.

No words fill Regina's mind, but she knows that it is the Holy Mother.

Holy Mother, Holy Mother,

just let me be
me
take away all this
illusion
and let me be
with You, by
You, in
You and of You.¹⁸

The light reaches a peak of brilliance that overwhelms her, but only for an instant before it begins to fade. As it diminishes, it forms the shape of a woman, a woman whose belly is large and ripe, who stands by Regina's side smiling. A bunch of fragrant, fresh herbs is spilling from her hands.

Regina knows she must open her eyes and re-enter the little room in the Graf's palace, but she does not want to. Her eyelids are heavy and she is enjoying the pure, green smell that the herbs caress her with. Someone places a hand on her forehead, the touch startles her and she opens her eyes. When she tries to sit up she finds that she has a blinding headache and is nauseous.

'You do not yet know how to control the power within you,' the pregnant woman standing at the side of her bed says. She pulls a few stems from the greenery she holds in her other hand and gives them to Regina. 'Smell these. They chase away the fumes that invade the head when it moves between the worlds.'

¹⁸ The Holy Mother replies; Remove the veils of illusion from your own mind, My daughter, and let Me flow through you.

Regina puts the fresh leaves to her nose and breathes. 'Tis,' she murmurs, 'and *lékaøský kozlík!* How wonderful!' Magdalena twitches beside her.

The woman places her hand on Magdalena's forehead, stroking it until the girl sleeps peacefully once again.

'How did you come here?' Regina says, still inhaling the fragrance of the leaves.

The woman smiles. 'It was her who led me here,' she says, stroking Regina's skin. 'She is doing a great deal of work for you.'

'I did not ask her to,' Regina puts the herbs down. 'I did not ask for anyone's help.'

'You did, child, you called on the Holy Mother.'

'But you are not Her!' Regina clutches at the bedclothes.

The woman smiles. 'You really must call me Mokoš, little one. I am not Her, but I am part of Her, as you are part of Her, as your sister is part of Her, and even your aunt is part of Her. Your mother is of Her as well, and my sisters in cunning work. She is within us all, as She is without us, and when one part of her is in need, those who can, come to attend. For we are all part of Her and when one of us is in pain we all come to heal, for it is ourselves we are healing.'

Regina frowns. 'Did no-one see you?'

'Oh yes,' Mokoš smiles. 'They all saw me, and yet they did not see me.'

Regina frowns again, but does not say anything.

'You must give him up.'

Regina chokes. 'What do you mean? Give who up?'

'Your *nothing*.'

‘How can I? It will not leave me!’ her face grows red and she brings the herbs to her nose again.

‘You are holding on to it, though. You are keeping it by your side. You are feeding with it your own fears and making it grow. And it binds you to this condition.’

‘I do not know what you mean,’ Regina mutters. ‘You should leave, *now*.’

‘I will leave, but I must give you something.’ Mokoš bends down and picks up a pack that lies on the floor next to her. She places it on the bed, opens it, and brings out a parcel wrapped in white linen and tied with a string. She unties the string and reveals three perfect crescent shaped rolls of bread.

‘Oh, Oma.’ Regina’s eyes moisten. ‘Oh, I used to know someone who baked these. But then she died.’

‘We know,’ Mokoš murmurs. ‘She was our sister, as well.’ Her face grows dark for a moment, and to Regina it is as if the sun had dimmed. ‘One of these,’ she continues, ‘is for you. One of these is for those of us alive who wait for the Holiest of Mothers to awaken. The third is for those of our sisters who have died at the hands of those who fear us. Together these three bring together the past, the present and the future. Use them to release the pain and terror that bind you, and to heal yourself from your fear.’

She leans forward and kisses Regina on the mouth. Regina can feel the large belly pressed into her, the quickening of the child within Mokoš. She wants to embrace the other woman, but is afraid.

Mokoš leans back a little and stares into Regina’s eyes. ‘Never, never be afraid to live,’ she says and kisses Regina once more. She straightens up, her hand pressed to

the small of her back, strokes Magdalena's sleeping face, picks up her pack and leaves.

Regina stares after her for a long time, until twilight has fallen and the room is dark. The cathedral bells begin to chime for evening mass. Regina does not think anything. She stands up from the bed, pulls on her dress, puts on her patched and mended boots, covers her head with her one light cloak, and leaves the room, following the sounds of the bells.

*

Regina prays

*O Maria, Breite Deine Mantel Aus,
Mache Schutz und Schirm Daraus
Lass uns Kinder darunterstehen
und Alle gefahren vorüber gehen.*

Holy Mother, here I am.

Here I am in Your Son's house, this great cathedral of stone. It is beautiful in here, in the quiet, quiet air. The breath of Your children makes the air rise and fall, soft as a dove's wings, soft as Yourself, Holy Mother.

Here I am. With You. Your daughter
at peace

at peace in this sanctuary from all that lies without, on my knees after the scurry scurry scurry of everyday life, of arriving here this morning, at rest on my knees and soft and safe within this quiet, quite air.

I would

I would spread my arms out and fly up to you but for the press of people in here, all waiting for the Mass to begin, all waiting to rest from their labour. Here, at the back of the Church, there are many who shuffle their feet, and cough, and sneeze, and even Magdi, I can hear her voice somewhere about me chattering under her breath to another. I would, if I could

silence everything and leave my body down here while I roamed up, up, up to the ceiling and beyond to be with You, up where the angels sing, painted on the high stone above me. I wonder how they got the stone up so high, suspended above us mere people as if by a miracle. A miracle that

stone

should sit so comfortably in the air like that, a miracle held up by You, Holy Mother. Held up in such beauty, such grace, such light that flows in from those high, high windows. Another miracle, that glass should sit within stone and not shatter.

I cannot

hold glass in my own two hands safely, and yet this

stone holds this glass with such trust, even as You held Your Son as He died in your lap. Holy Mother, I place myself in Your hands. Here I can breathe. Here the air is filled with

You.

Here there is no *nothing*. Here, that cannot penetrate Your shining presence, Your love, and Your protective arms. Here I am safe. It is so still, even my breath cannot mark the time, nor the beating of my heart. Between the breaths there is no time, only You. Holy Mother, You cover me and you protect me, and in Your arms I am safe.

Listen -

the bells ring.

Soon they will be coming in, soon they will bring me Your grace and sanctity. Soon I will be touching You, becoming one with You, flying away from my daily world and nestling close to You in peace and ease. Soon I will be with the angels as they gather around You to praise You. I will be one of them, I will no longer be this clumsy great clod who drops things and burns the linen, and is so frightened all the time, so lonely, and so silly. Forgive me, Holy Mother,

Mea Culpa

mea culpa, the only words I know in Your language, so lovely, so much lovelier than any of the words that I know, forgive me for being

me

for endlessly thrashing around in this unwieldy body that is so reckless and so thin. Thank You, Mother, for allowing me this peace, this little piece of Your Bliss once in my week, this space where there is nothing of my world, and everything of Yours. You are my

sanctuary. In here I can

breathe, I can

rest, I am

safe and

You

shine above me, within me, without me, lighting up my life and my heart and my soul and my wretched, wretched vapours. You

lift me

from this unending fear, this sickness that I cannot escape from.

Holy Mother, please intercede for me, please help me remove this curse of the *nothing*. Please fill me with something, anything, to stop up the hole in my breast that is there whenever *it* is by me. Please help me grow strong against it, so that it can return to whence it came.

Please allow me to return

to the girl that I once was. That girl, that laughing girl who would roam the forest all day long, that girl who could see no-one around her but feel Oma Rosa's eyes always on her, Oma's presence around her, watching, watching, in the eyes of the rabbits and squirrels and birds that would allow themselves to be seen and even once, yes even once the owl that strayed from her nest a little before sunset. That girl who could recognize a few herbs and pick them in the correct manner so that Oma Rosa's blind eyes would shine when she smelled the green, green scents crushed between her fingers, the cold, limp leaves that would curl away their shapes so that in their dying moments they would not be recognized. Holy Mother, please,

please

let me return. For

I can feel my edges beginning to curl

inward.

And only here, in Your Son's house, with

your cloak spread over and around me -

here as I stand under Your loving protection -

can I tell You

that

I am nothing more than a leaf that is dying slowly

slowly

the life leeches out of me and into that *nothingness*

that terror that is sucking the soul from my body

and is leaving me to die moment by moment,

curling inward to protect whatever is

left -

Oh Holy Mother of us all,

Spread Your cloak over me and don't

abandon me to try and protect myself when

my edges are drying inward and which soon will

crumble away from me, leaving me without

a shield at all.

Naked and immodest.

Dead.

Oh Holy Mother I am frightened and this is no place for fear. This is a place of Your love, and Your Son's love, and I don't want to feel fear in this place. I must be at peace, I must pray to You for peace, I *am* praying to You for peace, Holy Mother give me peace, give me peace, give me peace. Please.

And so a moment of silence, Holy Mother my chattering away has been stilled
for a moment. It is so lovely, so so lovely, just to kneel here and contemplate You

You in

silence, You in

essence, the Oneness of

You and

Me.

Me and You, we are together. You

once had a body as I, an body as unreliable and fragile and Holy Mother

were You once as clumsy

as I, were you once as

frightened as I and did You feel the cold, the damp, and the

darkness? Did You ever

look up at the full moon and feel something,

something

which is beyond all this in here?

Holy Mother, forgive me for saying this, but did You ever feel the

life

of the moon?

Oma Rosa, my

beloved,

my little mother, *babièka* my,

taught me about the moon, how she waxes and wanes, and becomes everything that I will be and Oma Rosa once was and we are all waning towards the dark. She told me that we are all sisters because we pass through the same movements as the moon, and how we can read each others' hearts because of the silver moon. Holy

Mother -

can you read my heart? Do you read my heart? Can I

read

yours?

We are One together, we are not separate, there is no-one above another here, you were what I once was, and Oma is what I am to be, and we are only apart by time, like the moon's movements, thin moon, blood moon, dark moon, white moon, silver moon, You are within and without me, Holy Mother, empty and full, You are my

sister

as I am sister and as others are

mother and then we all become

babièka

Oh holy, holy

peace, holy

silence and holy

stillness

the air here is so calm, so peaceful, so very

silent as I can kneel here

quiet, quiet and I can feel

You

a silent bell singing

through this still air

The thinness of air, it is

calm on my skin, but it is thin and through it I can feel the

waves

lapping and breaking on my skin,

a river, a river, a small trickle flowing through the air

Your presence lapping

on the banks of my

river's edge, You touch

soft, soft, warm, the sun shining through the water-soaked weeds

on the bank, so thin and full of You

that the green dissolves and becomes nothing, just a vessel, a window

to shine Your light through -

Holy Mother, I am not that thin yet,

I have not lost the sturdy earth

that makes up my shore, I still hold on

to my body despite Your soft touch.

Maybe one day I will be able to let my body go,

let Your water dissolve me, let my

soil flow out and away from me,

become like glass, full with You yet thin enough to let You

shine through me to the water, to the left-over soil, to the
grass, to the wild flowers and the fish and the animals that come to drink from
the river.

Flow through me, Mother.

Your silent bell sends its sound
through me, a river of Your heart beat.

Holy Mother I must
open my eyes and look around, I must
fill my vision with something, anything
a ray of sunlight that reaches into
this place from so high up,
so high up the light flows into this place
this sacred place
streams of white light, so cold and yet so
delightful so
cleansing,
no lye in the world could scrub this purity into us, into
me, no lye could bleach my poor red hands
into the fingers of white light that
spread from Your hands and reach into this sacred place,
touching us, touching me,
cleansing us, making us ready for communion with Your Son.

This, this

purity!

In dark, in confession -

I confess to You, Mother -

I cannot reach this sense, the sense of Your river flowing through me and
sweeping me clean, so cold, so pure cold, like a mountain waterfall, so sparkling,
clear, so

filled

with

lovely

nothing but something, this is a

nothing

that I can endure because it is full of You, Mother, it is Yourself in
me.

Is that a blasphemy, Holy Mother?¹⁹

That is what they might tell me but

I have no concern for that right now, no need to think on it.

I am cleansed with Your light, and I can see it

shining

shining

on one of the angels that sits near the window

¹⁹ The Holy Mother replies; 'The only blasphemy is the absence of Spirit in the heart.'

so high

above us down here.

A messenger, they say.

What message is there

here

for me? What may I learn from this? Where

may I go to feel You, to know

You, to

lose myself and become one with

You?

Who are You? Where are

You? For

although I feel You without me, I also know

You

within me, like a small heat, a flame, a

living energy

deep within me,

there

in that place where my belly is.

That place, that place they say is

dark and

unknown, that place of what they call

sin,

that place which I feel jumping

when the moon is dark, and swimming

when the moon is

full

Are You in there, as well? Do You

rise up from in there and

spread

through my limbs, and out of my skin, do You

enter me as You

leave me? Are You

within-without

me?

Are we one?

Holy Mother, You reach for me with Your arms

outstretched, You

spread

Your mantle to protect me, yet I also

reach for You - and where You before me,

coming to me like a sister who has

grief, I would

spread my cloak for you, I would

shelter You and comfort You, and make sure the troubles would pass by

You

as best as I possibly could. For

what else have I to

offer You?

In Your name I can give money to the poor, although I have little enough of
that.

In Your name I can burn candles, or incense, kneel before You and think of
You

but

Holy Mother, were You here before me, I would offer You

what I know of

love.

As I would give my mother, or my sister, or, if I ever have one,

daughter.

We have no need of

messengers, those who carry

stories

between us, for

as I confessed before, I cannot reach You in the dark, in the

little cabinet that locks out my sins from the rest of the world,

because

surely as I confess before a priest, I only

confess to him that which I believe he

wishes to

hear. It is

truth-but-not-truth;

it is

what-I-have-done-in-error-but-not-quite-exactly-it

it is

bent away

from the feelings which spread through my body, the sensations which

can never be translated into

words

it is an

error, a mistake of the tongue, the

lazy, heavy tongue which is not enough flesh

to feel what the rest

feels.

Holy Mother, here, between us, we can offer each other

All.

Naked, but not

afraid

as my body is mirrored in

Yours

Naked, but not in

iniquity

as we are within-without each other

mother, sister, daughter

with

in

each

other

And hush, now, I must be quiet, for the procession is
here to do You honour, to do honour to
Your Son, the one You brought
into this world.

All Your hard work, and not even a midwife, not even
a cunning woman to ease
Your labour.

Not a one to oversee Your
sorrow.

Hear, the door opens. Look at the candles, oh, and
smell
the incense.

Breathe
the fragrance of the blood of the precious
trees.

Here they come. A wave that rolls down the river,
you can follow the wave for as far as the river goes -
one, two, three, oh, how many more?

See their great huge man-boy feet stick out from underneath
their starched white robes! Who
keeps their linen so well? Holy Mother,
how many of them are there in this
procession?

Two by two
they march, but how many twos
pass by me?

one, two, three, and so many
more!

They march in silence, they march
two by two
past You, Dearest Mother, quite past
You -

quite past
me

And where am I
in all of this?
Where is my place here?
Where do I belong?
Where do
You?

*

Regina watches the procession and counts eighty or ninety young men marching down the centre aisle of the cathedral and take their places in the choir behind the altar.

She does not listen to the Mass - she cannot understand the Latin - she sits and stands and kneels with the rest of the crowd there, but her heart is elsewhere. It is not with the singing of the young men, nor is it with the candles that burn throughout the place, nor is it anywhere with the angels that are painted above her head. It is not in the high, high space that stretches above her, the vast space that is enclosed by stone, hand carved and arching to pointed enclosures over her head.

Regina's heart is within herself. She is almost dizzy with it as she feels the hole that has allowed her *nothing* in fill with a radiance she had forgotten she owned. Regina has found her self again.

And by the time the Mass has ended, she has made a decision.

She leaves, after the procession has worked its way from the choir stalls through the aisle and out of the heavy door, and after the crowd of people have followed it. She notices three figures sitting in the dark back pew that is underneath the disused musician's balcony. She smiles, for she recognizes the three figures - one white haired and bent, one pregnant and strong, and one young and lithe, all three wearing black lace veils that cover their faces. They bow, as one, to Regina, who smiles and bows back.

But she passes on, out through the huge iron door, around to the side of the cathedral, with its nearly-new entrance to the Pálffy catacombs, around the curved back whose stone buttresses reach forever upward, down the dusty steps and through the cobbled street that leads straight to the Pálffy palace.

When she reaches the room her sister still lies in, she opens the door to the dark chamber where so much of her pain is still contained, and stands at the threshold staring in.

‘What it is?’ Magdalena now speaks, her voice thin. ‘What more?’

‘Just one more night,’ she replies. ‘Just one more task I must complete and then I am going home.’

‘Home?’ Magdalena squeaks. ‘They won’t *let* you!’

‘It is not important whether they *let* me or not. I am returning. This city is not for me.’

Magdalena’s mouth is open, but she cannot reply.

Regina turns to her sister and smiles. ‘Be happy, Magdi, I am going to be rid of it forever now. I need you to help me, though. I need you to keep them away tomorrow, for I have a great deal of work to do.’

She walks into the dark room, and all that Magdalena can hear is the sound of fumbling and searching. She takes the little oil lamp that sits by her bedside and follows her sister inside. Regina is kneeling on the floor before the stool on which her pieta has been sitting. She holds in her hands a small, rough wooden carving of a white dove.

‘Oh, not *that* old thing!’ Magdalena mutters.

Regina turns to face her. 'Do you remember,' she says as though she has not heard her sister, 'how Oma Rosa would tell us that the Holy Spirit was the earthly form of the Mother? To see a white dove meant that the Holy Mother was nearby and we could ask Her for anything.'

Magdalena snorts. 'Have you seen any white birds in this city?'

Regina smiles. 'No, and that is why I bring this little bird out. They took my statue away from me, but I have something older, and something simpler to bring me into Her presence.'

'What are you going to do?' Magdalena stares at her sister.

Regina smiles again, 'Just make sure that no-one disturbs me now.'

*

Four hours after . . . the father confessor prepared to go to the house and give a casket with relics to Regina who was relieved of her duties. Regina, because of the great distress and strain of her spirit was afforded a little rest, awakened suddenly and called out, 'Whatever are you giving me, my father? You have taken something with you that belongs to me!' . . .

Shortly on this the maiden fell into the deepest ecstasy, enraptured. No movement, no feeling was to be noticed on her, hardly that from the feeblest pulse of the heart and the artery the sign a feeble life was noticeable, over which all were amazed.

This state lasted one hour!

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, pp126-127

There is a great bustle in the hallway as Regina's aunt tries to prevent a priest from making his way up to Regina's room. Her uncle and the nightwatchman are following them, and the priest strides down the stone corridor, clutching a packet in his arms. He bursts into Magdalena's room and the door slams into the wall as it swings open. There is a crash as a trinket or two falls to the floor. Magdalena is sitting on her bed, lounging back on her arms. She jumps up as the party enter her room and stands in front of Regina's door.

'You - you cannot go in there, sir. My sister is not well enough to see you now,' she stammers.

But the inner door opens and a waft of the rotten dank smell pours out from the room. Everyone takes a step away from the stench. Regina stands in the door way and smiles.

'What is it you have there, sir?' she asks the priest.

He fumbles with the string of the package, and lets the wrapping fall to the ground. Tante stares at the cloth. Her face is grim. The priest holds a small carved stone angel and thrusts it towards Regina. 'Here,' he says, his cheeks red. 'I brought this for you since we had to take your miraculous pieta away. You see -'

Regina holds a finger to her lips. 'I thank you, father,' she says. 'But it is not necessary. I have the Holy Spirit with me now.'

'But, but,' the man blusters. 'Nobody knows I brought you this!'

Regina's voice is soft and sweet. 'You did well to think of me, father, but I have all the comfort I need. I thank you, but I must -' she clears her throat, '*pray* now.'

Tante mumbles something but no one in the room listens to her words. Magdalena believes she hears the words 'damned heretics' but she lets the words slip by her.

Regina turns and walks back into her room. She lies down on the bed and closes her eyes. Tante turns to the priest and shrugs. She walks away, her husband and the nightwatchman following.

The priest calls into the darkness, 'What is it you are praying for?'

'Deliverance,' Regina answers.

'From what?' he shouts again.

But there is no answer.

[²⁰]

²⁰ The darkness swallows Regina, and she feels herself dissolve into a mist. When it clears she finds herself on the bank of a great river with thousands and thousands of other people, who are dressed in the strangest colours she has ever seen being worn; great swathes of rose and orange and saffron cloth cover these multitudes. She looks down and finds herself, too, dressed in a robe the colour of primroses. Up ahead of the people, in the blue, blue sky above them, a great white light shines. As her eyes adjust to the light she can see that the light is pouring from two hands that are cupped together above them all. The light itself spills from the hands and each beam finds its way to the forehead or the throat or the heart of each person that stands on the lush river bank. Regina searches for her own beam, but can find none to touch her. She feels sad, a depth of sadness that overwhelms her completely, and she begins to cry. It is then that an old, old man approaches her. It is Klement. Regina's sadness turns to fear, and then to anger, but she sees that he cannot touch her, indeed, that he just stands by her. 'What is it,' she asks, 'Dear Goddess, what must I do?' The sound of bells fills her ears, at once soothing and exciting. Through the waves of sounds she hears the sweetest voice it is possible to hear; 'Find the hole yourself, and drive its darkness away. Then you are truly free of the fear that plagues you.' Regina looks down at her body but can see nothing more than her arms. She pulls at the golden cloth that covers her and when it falls away discovers that her entire body is a void, a *nothing*. She is surprised that so much fear has overtaken her soul. She looks at Klement, who waits beside her, and knows that he is her creation, her terror. Suddenly she is overcome with love, love for this thing she herself has made. And in a bright wave of golden light her body is restored, and her skin shines radiant and she notices that Klement is gone. She raises her hands to the Hands in the sky and is lifted up.

When Regina returns, she can remember nothing more, despite the relieved pleas of the priest and her sister, who have been trying to rouse her for the past hour.

*

Priests and others, incidentally 20 in number, have, when at midday the spirit, as he before had said, manifested in the form of a white dove; to show his manifesting he touched the little table, which those present also saw.

Narratio Rei Admirabilis, p122

The next day is hot and sunny. Tante rampages through the entire house, opening the windows. Regina is sick, she lies in her bed sweating and exhausted. Magdalena follows her aunt and assists her in her work, and bites her tongue to stop herself from letting loose her rage at the tirade against Regina that underscores their work.

Just before midday, an envoy of priests arrive at the Pálffy palace. They are allowed into the servants' quarters without a word, and move as one through the corridors until they reach Magdalena's room. They say nothing, but as they arrive at Regina's room, a well-worn book is produced and is laid at the end of Regina's bed. One man carries a bottle of blessed water, and another a candle and a bell, which are also set down at the foot of the bed. They circle around the bed, two close at either side of Regina.

Regina opens her mouth but no sound comes out. She cannot scream, she cannot sigh. Sweat pours from her temples and her body until her nighshift turns a darker grey. There are vague visions passing through her mind, but she cannot hold on to any of them. The men close the door behind them, but soon find they cannot tolerate the darkness nor the suffocating air in the room and open the door again.

Regina does not register the sight of her aunt holding her sister back, her large arms wrapped around the small body.

One of the men, searching the room, steps back and against the little stool with its three pieces of bread. They fall to the floor, but no-one replaces them. The book has been opened and the lid of the blessed water uncorked. Regina begins to whimper, but she cannot hold her hands to her still-bruised face as the two men on either side of her are holding her down on the bed.

In the distance the house clock strikes midday. A breeze stirs in through the open window, it is hot and carries dust into the room.

But with the wind the room suddenly becomes brighter. A light has penetrated through the gloom, and seems to scour the thick, dank air even from the corners behind the door and up amongst the dark wooden beams of the ceiling. The candle's flame is extinguished, the room silent.

From outside the room the sounds of a scuffle can be heard as Magdalena squeaks, 'He's here, he's *here!*' But no one pays any attention to this. Inside Regina's room, the light illuminates the faces of the men and the woman. The men are either looking at the floor, or gazing in horror, trying to find a source of the light.

Regina's eyes are closed, but there is a smile on her face. The light is so bright that even the bruise marks seem dull against her skin.

*

Holy Mother, Holy

Mother

here we are
together at last, together without
anything other, simply
me and You.

We are one.

I am no longer
*nothing*²¹.

*

There is a fluttering sound, of wings beating.

‘Angels,’ one of the men in the room mutters.

‘Look,’ another one says.

The dove has flown into the room. It flaps about, seeking a way out, until it spies the broken bread in the corner of the room. It lands on the stool and begins to peck at the crumbs.

‘The Holy Ghost,’ the phrase rumbles through the room, a wave of sound that is passed from mouth to mouth.

‘The spirit has ascended,’ says one man, closing the book he had been holding in his hands.

Regina says nothing.

²¹ The Holy Mother smiles.

The light begins to fade in the room, and the bird, cold, rises from the stool with a long splinter of bread in its mouth. Against the darkening room its light grey feathers seem to glow whiter, until it follows the light out of the door and away, possibly through the open window in the corridor.

The men follow the path of the bird, silent, until no one is left in the room except Regina. She, too, rises from the bed and out of the room. In the corridor, she finds Magdalena, released from her aunt's grip.

Regina embraces her sister.

'It is over,' she whispers, clinging hard to her sister. 'It is gone.'

*

Part III

The woman stares into the man's eyes. 'It is over. I am finished,' she says.

'Now there is nothing left for me except to go home.'

The man breaks away from her gaze and begins rubbing his eyes. 'Am I expected to believe you?' he mutters.

'Believe what you will, it is what has happened to me.'

He places his hands on his knees. His mind experiments with the word *witch* once more, but the word does not sit well, and so he allows it to dissipate. He finds that nothing comes to his mind at all, but he feels a great warmth in his belly, unlike anything he has ever felt before.

Regina stands. She moves to the door, and stands in the framework. 'Look,' she says. 'Twilight approaches.'

He rubs his eyes yet once again, and notices that the light has dimmed, and outside in the little anteroom, shadows are beginning to chase across the floor. He brings his hand to his mouth and rubs the knuckles against his teeth. He sighs.

'You know, Miss Regina, I will never be able to present this story before the Bishop.'

Regina does not turn to him. 'I know. But I do not care. I am going home.'

The man's voice is soft and low. 'I would have it that I could write your story as it is. I would let it take the shape your words dictate.'

Regina's back still faces the man. 'But that would mean I should have to stay here and ensure that you write it correctly. I have been held here by you long enough.'

'Could you not bear it here any more? Not even for the sake of your story?' He coughs. 'Not even for the sake of the Holy Mother?'

She spins around and faces him, her eyes wide and glaring. 'Do not insult me,' she growls, 'do not play with my words.'

The man stands, shaking out his cassock. 'In such case there is little else I can do. I have listened to what you have said, and now I must return and make of these events a presentable tale for the Bishop. Ultimately it is he who shapes this story.'

He walks to the door and steps out of the room, passing Regina, passing out of the dank little cubby hole that still smells of rot. But his eyes have trouble adjusting to the pale light in the next room, and as he turns to face her, he sees her skin illuminated by some light that cannot possibly have its source from the rooms around them.

'I wish,' he begins, but Regina shakes her head.

'Oma Rosa would always tell me to take care of what I wish for, lest it come true,' she smiles for one moment. 'Do not wish me here any more.'

He shifts from foot to foot. 'I only wanted to wish you well. It is unlikely that we will meet again.'

Regina leans against the door frame. 'Good bye,' she says. 'Let the truth be your guide.'

The words puzzle him, and he cannot think of a response. He grins, a tightening of his lips over his teeth, and leaves her. He has work to attend to.

Regina watches him leave, and as soon as his form has turned the corner of the corridor, she reaches under her bed and pulls out her trunk. Opening the lid wide, she smiles down into it, letting the fragrant air of the dried pine needles lining its bottom rise up to greet her.

She knows she is going home.

*

The Private Diary of a Ghostwriter21st July 1642

[It is very late. The candle on the scribe's desk is burned almost to the end, the wick just floating in the last little spot of tallow in its holder. The scribe's fingers are blackened by ink, his hair mussed and flecked with more ink, victim of his fingers combing through for hours on end. The skin around his eyes is dark, but his eyes themselves shine lustrous in the flickering candle's light. His cheeks are flushed and rosy. His feet dance a happy rhythm underneath the desk, heels tapping as his fingers work the stylus, which is almost blunt. Piles of paper lie scattered around the room. Again. Almost buried underneath them is a folded letter closed over with a large wax seal.]

Finally, finally, the task is finished. I have written it down to the best of my ability. Although I fear it is nothing near the girl's narrative. She spoke so much and I understood so little of it that I fear I might have made many errors. I certainly have not been able to follow her sense of the time of the whole incident - she did not seem to speak in a way that indicated the good and natural order of the passage of time. But I am pleased with my work. It begins to make sense to me.

Whether or not the girl is guilty of the devil's work I cannot say. It becomes unimportant in the light of her devotion to the Holy Mother. That she expressed her desire to return to her village and, no doubt, resume cunning work, is negotiable.

Anything is possible when dealing with these young women, and for sure circumstances might prevent her from returning.

The work is finished! I have taken the tangled skeins of her words and created of them a plausible story that fulfils its own truth! However I doubt that the Bishop would be pleased with it wholly. The good Bishop has spent many years in ministering to the political arm of our Church and has not spent much time of late delving into the more arcane knowledges that I, scribe of the Church, must study to make sense of them. I fear that the Bishop would not understand many of the references that I have inferred from the girl's strange tale. This could present a problem. I would rather the tale stand on its own, that my own writing be kept in its purity, the themes and ideas left intact and without intervention of a dogma which, although I am servant to it, must not inhibit the ideas of my work.

It is the first time in many years that I have felt this freedom in my work.

Hopefully this is not a taint, but rather an expansion of God's will.

I fear not everyone will understand what I have written.

[The scribe throws the pen down. The candle is flickering and sputtering its last light through the room. The scribe leans back in his chair, stretching his arms above his head, his elbows and finger joints cracking. He turns his head to one side and something catches his eye. It is the red seal that is half-hidden by a pile of papers. He stands, stretching his aching back, and leans down to pick the letter up. His hip joints are stiff, and he winces as he bends down. He sits back down on his chair, opens the seal, and begins to read. He reads;]

‘Esteemed brother, we are unsatisfied as to the length of time you have taken to report the story of the alleged miracle. We find that we must have a coherent proof that the incidents that have taken place are indeed miraculous of nature, and beneficial to the cause of our Holy Church in this time of troubled division seeks to stamp out the blasphemy of heresy.

‘As it stands, we have had word that Evangelist scholar, Zacharius Láni, will be publishing a monograph entitled *Pseudospiritus Posoniensis, or the Judgement Over the False Preßburger Ghost*. We feel that it is imperative that this case be reported in the light of the Holy Truth. We are pressed to remind you, brother, that if this incident should, indeed, prove to fall into accord with the canon law and definition of a miracle, that not only will the young woman herself be absolved of any taint of the accusation of witchcraft, but that you yourself will have served to report a miracle of God that can only serve His Church on earth and sway the legions of heretics away from any false conclusions of their own minds.

‘Yours and etc,’

[The candle gives its last flicker before the wick sinks into the hot liquid tallow. The room is left in darkness, the scribe cursing at the night.]

Epilogue - voices and miracles

There's something I didn't tell you about that Holy Ironing Board.

When I touched it for the first time - I was too afraid to take a photo of it, being too aware of rules and regulations - I had a vision. It seemed perfectly normal to have a vision in the tower of an ancient cathedral, where the cobwebs danced in the ceiling's corners and the air smelled of damp and rot and a thousand other stories that were waiting so patiently. The air really did stand still, and the world around me really did vanish, and my sense of the boundaries of my body dissolved. It really was as 'they' all say these things go. I never wrote about this before because it stayed etched into my numinous memory, like one of 'those' dreams, one of 'those' anti-intellectual knowings. I never wrote about it before because I did not want that act of magic to occur - I did not want to create a reality of my vision, pin it down on paper, capture it and give it a space, give it life. I was afraid of it because I did not know what it meant. Or perhaps I did.

This was my vision;

As I touched the old, old wood and age-thinned cloth, I saw a man. He was dressed in dark robes, mostly brown, mostly black, and in some pain. He had a long dark beard. He was frightening. He kept giving me this message, this directive - 'be a good girl. Always be a good girl.'

It was what happened at that moment.

I was not comfortable with it.

I did not think I liked it.

Whether it was my subconscious mind doing this to me or not.

If this really was a vision, then I could say that in St Martin's Cathedral another family miracle occurred, and this time to me. But I am no longer sure that miracles are supposed to leave you with a sweet taste in your mouth. I suspect that miracles occur to signal a beginning or an end to a journey of growth, and the notion of 'miracle' as we know it - one blinding and un-real act that suddenly rights all the wrongs - is quite fallacious.

The insidious and persistent whispering 'be a good girl, always be a good girl' shocked me. At first I thought it such a mundane message I refused to have anything to do with it. And when I began to become intrigued with Regina, my poor laundry-maid and her problems, the bearded man's words kept echoing in my head, around and around and around until Regina became a victim of *this* man's directives as well. When this happened, Regina became stuck, became stagnant, and her story progressed nowhere. And soon that insidious phrase, that bogged down feeling, began to affect me also.

Why did I *have* to be a 'good girl'? *Who* says so? I tried to avoid thinking about this as much as possible. In fact those words drove me to explore this notion, a 'good girl.' Whenever I had heard these words as a child something inside me screwed up tightly and unpleasantly and I felt angry angry angry. So angry I wanted to shout but I was trying hard to be a good girl so I merely sulked instead. It was the same feeling I had when I went to a Mass at the Cathedral of My Family's Miracles and saw the rows and rows of young men proceed in, dressed in their lace vestments with their great big Nikes and Reeboks poking out from under their hems. Something deep inside my belly was screeching out; *where am I in all this?* I was conscious at the time that this was not a very 'good girl' thought to have. There was no layer of

respectful feelings anywhere in that cry. And an odd sort of reversal began to occur underneath all these voices that were weaving through my inner ear, bidden and unbidden voices.

The year I returned to the mythic old country I lived for a time with my newfound but aged blood family. I was the same age as my mother when she fled that place for the mythic lucky country of her own dreams. And I had changed a great deal from the woman I was when I first went there with my mother and my father. I realized that the first foray into the mythic old land was an attempt to connect my self through my familial past. But having done this, having seen the stories come true before my eyes and having processed and digested this world, I could not remain in it. There was something vital within my self that could not abnegate itself to the 'old ways.' I could not identify myself in the 'old country.' I could not succumb to the old customs, the old rituals, the old stories that felt like a giant step backwards for me. I could not be a good girl. I could not deny my self, which identified with nothing I had lived so far. Living with my relatives became very, very difficult. It took me back to a place I had already lived as a child, and had grown out of, and I began to feel that now more than ever I could not be the good girl of someone's - *whose?* - expectations. I began to feel more and more distanced from my own family. I felt the pressure of this good girl weighing down on me and I rebelled against it. All those precious parts of my self that I had cultivated and nurtured and honoured suddenly were somehow 'wrong.' Everything which did not fit in with the standard model of the good girl was dissected and questioned and found wanting - I began making up lies to justify my self because Art and life collapsed and I found myself looking over my shoulder constantly for the witchhunters and the witch-pyre. Between the fear and the anger

towards the fear I realized that it is impossible to go backwards. I circled the cobblestoned, gargoyle-filled streets of the old town that Regina would have known, day after day, walking away the sense of entrapment, walking the miles out of that place. I wrote poems, attempting to conjure back my sense of self, trying to sing my own voice back;

tired

of being told what to do

by old men and old women

she takes off without

her tongue

her throat is

cut

and heckled in the street she

smiles

in this windless city waiting

for winter to get her waiting

with her brain

reeling

with sour words & sad words & sick words &

tongues

always flaming at her heels at her

pagan

happiness

she craves wine

at nine o'clock in the morning -

unsatisfied, hungry, alone

without her tongue she

begs the question;

to kill her wild

heart or

not?

Where is her sense of

wonder?

Where is her

majick?

Where is her fire, her passion,

is she grounded or

blown about in this airless old town?

What water flows

through her here?

And lastly, where

can she regain her

Spirit?

No tear falls upon her

page

You get the message. Desperation made me feel *desperate*. Interior journeys are not held in great esteem these days. But it is impossible for anyone to find their own authentic voice without embarking on such a trip. This, it seems to me, is my contribution to the continuing saga of My Family's Miracles. Stuffed back into the confines of tradition and the old ways and the old structure, constricted by those good old 'mind forg'd manacles', my miracle is that my self did not die but instead stumbled about in the dark for a while, and rebirthed stronger and louder and less of a good girl than ever. And broke free, finally. And my self still dances the song and story told through the woman's voice, but the woman who sings and speaks no longer has anything to do with even the scent of a 'good girl.' And the other miracle is, is that she no longer needs to. Miracles do engender change. Even if the change must first go through a sticky, painful, dark journey forward.

During my last night in Bratislava, alone in a cramped and rotting-garlic scented room, I dreamed. It was one of 'those' dreams, one of those anti-intellectual 'knowing' dreams, and very dark. 'I had a dream last night,' I wrote in my journal. 'a very frightening dream, that I was talking in complete darkness to an old woman . . . She was holding my hand and telling me not to ask a certain question, not to ask the third question, when all of a sudden my hand was in her mouth and she was trying to eat me up like a snake swallows a mouse, starting with my hand. Re-telling it sounds quite straightforward, but in the night it was quite scary . . . I am still . . . in the underworld and . . . my sister is an old woman telling me what to do in the dark in that whining, wheedling voice that tries to be persuasive and pathetic . . . Being swallowed whole by an old woman and feeling her teeth bite my hand; the hand that works, the hand that does things; it was my right hand, so my outer face, my professional side,

what is shown to the world. My left hand was busy protecting my handbag, my ticket and my passport back to home in the dream; my intuition is protecting me . . . don't ask questions about who you really are, don't ask questions in the name of feminism. Don't reveal to the light, keep these things in the dark.'

It frightened me when I realized that this dark and hungry old woman was the 'good girl' that I was supposed to be. This good girl was trying to swallow me whole!

But I am happy to report that I refused this option. I had returned to the 'old country' alone. I wanted to see if in this state of solitary being I felt the same connective tissue to the place as I had when with my own family. I wanted to stay clear headed and silent and reliant completely on my own resources to experience my own feelings. I wanted to *know* this place without the burden of someone else's history, through my own eyes and with my own voice and *in my own time*. And this clarity - which cannot be attained, I believe, without some sort of journey straight into the confusion that is its catalyst - helped me break through so many layers of 'the good girl', even 'the bad girl'. This clarity brought to life the complexity beneath the surfaces that are covered over with layers and layers of archetypal, mythological and social constructions and images of 'woman.' And it brought me so much closer to the reality that would have been Regina.

Regina, the laundry maid, Regina, the victim and yet not, Regina, the handmaid of a ghost who burned her and beat her. Regina, whose ironing board was branded with the hand of a violent dead man. Regina, who found out that prayers could not save her from the haunting. Regina, as it is reported, the ultimate 'good girl.' And that is what remained with the Holy Ironing Board; an image of a good girl. Regina, I believe, did not remain.

And that is what I believe I saw and felt when I touched this relic. And I cannot untangle that vision from the layers and years of legend and social conditioning that also lie buried in its soft wood and time-thinned linen. And I think the miracle here is this - that somewhere beneath all the pomp and whispering changes of historical re-telling, there is an authentic voice. There is an authentic woman's voice. And all of a sudden, Art and life collapsed together again and I realized that the voices inside my head suddenly became my voice, *my* authentic voice and I could now know how Regina felt. I had learned to hear her through her own voice, not through the voice of a structure that stole her story away from her. I had learned to hear her voice through the medium of fear.

Sometimes fear is a good thing, if we look it in the eye and grab it by the throat. Even on an interior journey.

This act can save us from having to be the good girl.

I'm not entirely sure I'll let a vision tell me to be a good girl again.

*

Quotations Cited within the Text

p1 - This prayer translates as: 'Oh Mary, Spread Your cloak out/Create peace and safety there/Let us children stand underneath/and all dangers pass over us.'

p5 - from Showalter, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', in Showalter, ed, 1985, *The New Feminist Criticism*, pp262-263

p36 - from Krämer, Heinrich & Sprenger, Jacob, 1486, *The Malleus Malificarum*, in Kors, Alan C & Peters, E, eds, 1972, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A Documentary History*, p117

p82 - from Krämer, Heinrich & Sprenger, Jacob, 1486, *The Malleus Malificarum*, in Kors, Alan C & Peters, E, eds, 1972, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A Documentary History*, p127

p97 - A 'hasterman' is a mythological creature of Czech and Slovak folklore. A watersprite, the hasterman (or *vodník*) dresses entirely in green, and waits by village ponds to entice and entrap the souls of young people in upturned jars beneath the water. It is possible to identify a hasterman when he leaves his place in the local drinking establishment by the pool of water left on the chair by his perpetually wet clothes and body. Karl Erben describes the *vodík* in his poem of the same name in his collection of poems inspired by Czech folklore entitled *Kytice* (Erben, 1951: 85-94).

pp160-161 - Latvian Women's Folk Poem No· 35817.83 from Budapest, Z, 1998, *Summoning the Fates: A Woman's Guide to Destiny*, p89

pp179-180 - Psalm 150

p194 - Latvian Women's Folk Poem No· 9188.224.109, 335, from Budapest, Z, 1998, *Summoning the Fates: A Woman's Guide to Destiny*, p168

p195 - Latvian Women's Folk Poem No· 34185.73, from Budapest, Z, 1998.

Summoning the Fates: A Woman's Guide to Destiny, p103

A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh:

**A Novel and Exegesis Exploring the Numinous
Feminine, The Interior Journey and Sites of
Resistance within a Patriarchal World**

Niqi Thomas

VOLUME TWO

This thesis is in two parts - a novel *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, and an accompanying exegesis.

Volume One comprises the creative component of the thesis, the novel *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* which forms eighty per cent of the thesis.

Volume Two comprises the theoretical component of the thesis, an exegesis which explores specific theoretical and literary paradigms with particular reference to *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*.

A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh: A Novel and Exegesis
Exploring the Numinous Feminine, the Interior Journey and
Sites of Resistance within a Patriarchal World

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Introduction

A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh: A Novel and Exegesis Regarding the Numinous Feminine, the Interior Journey and Sites of Resistance within a Patriarchal World

What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open. (Rukeyser, 1982: xxxv).

The novel, *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, actually grew out of a desire to rewrite a simple story. The story of the ghostly ironing board - which only later I discovered in Alexander Gaibl's *Narratio Rei Admirabilis oder Beschreibung Eine Wunderlichen Tat* (1910)¹ - was a familiar tale told to me by both my mother and grandfather. I have always had a fascination with the Gothic, the supernatural, the metaphysical, that is, the 'scary', the *unheimlich*. The tale of the burned hand was one of the subconscious inspirations that have been lingering with me since childhood, a remnant of the bedtime stories of my grandfather and mother. It was not until I came to Slovakia for the first time after the tumultuous events of the fall of Communism that the story I had been remembering for years took concrete shape. Over a Sunday lunch that reminded me of the long-ago lunches of my deceased grandmother, my mother, her cousin and I began discussing the story of the ghostly ironing board. And another version of this tale was recounted, Cousin Klara's version involving a completely different narrative yet again. Klara sprang up from the table and pulled a book from the shelf, a battered old book with a fading gilt cover from which thin

¹ *Narratio Rei Admirabilis* (NRA) is a narrative about, and meditation upon, a series of supernatural events that occurred in the central European city of Bratislava in 1641-42. The *NRA* text was published under the auspices of the Catholic Church of Pozsony in 1910. The city in which the events occurred

pages came loose from the binding. 'Read for yourself,' she said and gave me the book. The book was mysteriously titled *Narratio Rei Admirabilis oder Beschreibung Eine Wunderlichen Tat* (*Narrative of an Admirable Thing, or Description of a Wonderful Occurrence*). I curled up in a big chair - much as I did when I was a child at such grown-up functions - and tried to read the entire thing. But when evening came and we had to leave, I was reluctant to put the book away and Cousin Klara decided to give it to me as a gift, since I had known the tale all my life and now could read the 'truth' about the events.

I carried the book home with me in a backpack several kilos overstocked with books, and on the other side of the world began to read the 'truth' of my family's story. This was the 'truth': a self-serving ghost haunted a laundry-maid, beat her, burned her and in the whole narrative she never got a word in edgewise. Here lay the spark that caused the drive towards fiction. Throughout my reading of the story I found myself wondering over and over, how does the poor girl feel about all this? Surely, since she has been beaten, burned, scared so much that she is lying ill, she must *feel* something other than meek and passive acceptance of her lot? Within even these questions I began to sense a certain anger beneath the muteness of the laundry-maid. I began to sense a need to develop through writing a voice, a specifically female voice, responding not only to the events of the haunting, but of also to how the laundry-maid's world responded to the haunting, and how she herself reacted to the world around her. This was the genesis of the novel for this PhD project. At first this presented a difficult task as it was not yet clear how the character of Regina Fischer, the laundry-maid protagonist, existed as a human being, a viable, complex character. Gaibl's narrative, although disjointed in style, was clear on the exposition of events

has been known by three names which are still interchangeable: the Auto-Germanic name of Pressburg, the Hungarian name of Pozsony, and the Slovak name, Bratislava.

and the persons involved with the case. A contemporary re-telling of the narrative line would not, it seemed to me, begin to encompass some of the issues of feminism and female spirituality that I was beginning to question through the development of the character of Regina Fischer.

The drafting process of the novel grew from an intertwined relationship between creative writing, physical research in the field, and a deepening involvement with theoretical research. The initial project of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* was to create a novel utilizing one writing technique, that of *écriture féminine*. However, as the drafting of the novel progressed in tandem with the research processes, several thematic strands were revealed that created a multi-layered structure within the novel itself. The first draft was written in a loose, stream-of-consciousness style that attempted to continue the *écriture féminine* project of Hélène Cixous, but this style was not sufficient to express the several new strands of narrative that the physical and theoretical research was beginning to reveal. Throughout the subsequent drafts, I found that there were three important narrative lines that needed to be considered and incorporated into the narration of this ‘wonderful thing’: the first was the original version of the events of the seventeenth century, the second Alexander Gaibl’s nineteenth-century account taken from the original version, and the third my own twenty-first century account informed by both contemporary feminisms and postmodern critical thinking. It became apparent that *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* could not remain as either a radical, avant-garde text in the *écriture féminine* style, nor a straightforward historical account shaped into a narrative novel. My research into the depths of both historical and theoretical notions informed not only the layering of the narrative drafting process, but also my own theoretical approach to the novel. My aesthetic judgement led me to see that drafting the novel according to one particular

style or novelistic tendency would not represent adequately the complex, multi-structured tale that was evolving from the research and the drafting of the novel.

A creative decision needed to be made at this point: how was the story of Regina Fischer to be constructed? Since Regina Fischer and her voice had been silenced, the choice was presented to explore *écriture féminine* and how this form of writing could represent the 'unknowable' female voice - for Regina's silence through the representations of her by historians implied to me an unknown force: who was she, why was she haunted, and what did she think and feel about the whole incident? *Écriture féminine* and its theoretical exploration of language pointed a way to knowing the unknowable Regina Fischer. Using the medium of a female language could uncover and unsilence a voice that would present her own narrative, her own thoughts and feelings, her own experience and growth through these uncanny circumstances.

Because of the nature of *écriture féminine* and its explorations, a departure needed to be made from more conventional analysis of the female within a historical context. During my research fieldwork in Slovakia, it was pointed out to me that there existed strong cult tendencies surrounding the Mother of God during the seventeenth century. Furthermore, because the legend of the ghostly ironing board is attached to a carved Piéta that is exhibited in the St Martin's Cathedral in Bratislava, and because Regina Fischer - according to Gaibl, but a point narratively undervalued by him - was accused of witchcraft, and because the organic writing process was developing the characters in this direction, it became necessary to undertake a study of the numinous female and the concept of the female Divine.

In turn, this led to a need to examine the historical notion of the female Divine in terms of a personal journey. The question arose: to what extent did Regina's

external world, rooted in the Symbolic Order of central European Christian-Catholic Reformation, impinge upon her own experience? To what extent was Regina influenced by those around her who - again according to Gaibl - were recording and (in my opinion) dictating her responses? An exploration of what I have termed the 'interior journey' needed to be made.

Thus, the exegesis for *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* contains three major chapters. Chapter One examines the numinous female in context with Regina Fischer's journey through *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, in particular the relationship of the numinous feminine with the Divine as a site of resistance. This chapter examines Goddess Spirituality as a site of resistance and specifically how the spiritual practice of the numinous female creates a space that exists separate to, and apart from, the Symbolic Order of patriarchal religion and spiritual practice. This chapter also bridges notions of the numinous feminine in the past and in the present, establishing a nexus between what might be thought of as 'unofficial' history (in terms of the patriarchal Symbolic Order's representation of 'official' History) and the lived experience of the Divine Feminine. This chapter therefore examines the complex and deepening relationship of the novel to its characters, a relationship that serves to break away from the binary oppositions that have up until now served to define western patriarchal and feminist Symbolic Orders, thus creating sites of resistance in both the novel and its exegetical explanation.

Chapter Two links the creation of sites of resistance to the strictures of patriarchal history through the examination of the interior journey within *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*. This chapter unpicks/deconstructs the notion that the writer of historical fiction is sufficiently disinterested from her own historical-cultural constructs to create a text that is impartial or indeed, an accurate contemporary

account of the era being described; this chapter also examines the practice of writing back to history as a theoretical tool that breaks down the strictures of definition separating the past from the present. Again, the nexus of past and present is challenged in terms of a patriarchal Symbolic Order which filters and divorces past experience from present day understanding. Thus Chapter Two explains how the creation of Regina Fischer as challenging and unexpected voice serves to further dissolve the binary oppositional archetypes/stereotypes that either a straightforward historical depiction might produce, or that an *écriture féminine* experiment might create. Furthering this line of theoretical inquiry, Chapter Two demonstrates and explains how notions of the 'interior journey' and the 'authentic voice' serve as a literary technique to 'write back' to history in a more profound and intimate way, that creates an added dimension to the narrative of Regina Fischer. In terms of literary technique, this serves to conflate time in both the creative and theoretical senses, which creates a challenge to conventional historicity. This challenge serves as a signpost for feminist discourse within the patriarchal framework and challenges the binary dualities which operate in the western patriarchal Symbolic Order.

Chapter Three deepens the multi-layered exposition of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* and examines how the novel utilizes and extends the notion of sites of resistance beyond *écriture féminine*. Chapter Three explains how *écriture féminine* is challenged by the drafting process of the novel, and how this literary technique is extended to encompass not only traditional notions of 'female language' but also 'male language' and 'male experience' within the patriarchy: this broadening of the *écriture féminine* paradigm departs from the conventional duality of female/male and thus serves to not only create theoretical sites of resistance within the novel, but also to peel away from the binary duality itself. Thus notions of some feminisms are also

challenged by *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, which takes into account the creative process as part of the theoretical developments of feminist/patriarchal ideologies. The subsection ‘*Écriture Feminine* and the “male”’ examines the challenging notion that a ‘female language’ can be applied to ‘male experience,’ and how this practice in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* creates a site of resistance to patriarchal constructs of the relationship of the self to the self and to its exterior world. Chapter Three also considers the role of *écriture féminine* in the creation of Regina Fischer’s voice: sites of resistance are created and explored apart from the patriarchal Symbolic Order through private language, rather than personal, reactive silence that resists its challenges and exists in a stalemate with the patriarchal Symbolic Order. In this way the stalemate is broken and space is created for the evolution of the concepts discussed within *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* and its exegesis.

All of these notions - the Divine Feminine, the ‘interior journey’, and the challenge of *écriture féminine* - intertwine throughout the various layers that are created by the novel *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*. The following exegesis explains the various intersections of ideas, yet perhaps the concept that foregrounds the many layers that create the novel is that of the numinous female and the Feminine Divine. It is with this reference point that I begin the exegesis of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*.

Chapter One

Aspects of the Divine/Relationships with the Divine as a Site of Resistance: Goddess Spirituality and Sites of Resistance in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*

You can only read against the grain if misfits in the text signal the way.

(These are sometimes called 'moments of transgression.') (Spivak, 1988: 211).

In her essay 'Beyond Belief' (1980), Luce Irigaray describes the dream of one of her female psychoanalytic clients: the analysand dreamed that her husband and son were celebrating the Christian rite of Eucharist, and when the two men recited the liturgical phrase 'this is my body, this is my blood,' the woman herself bled. She herself was not taking part in the sacrament. A richly symbolic dream on any level, Irigaray goes on to comment:

Yet, this message is in my opinion the essential preliminary for any consideration of sexual difference . . . At least consciously, secondarily, she does not accept the men's current forms of belief. This is not to say that she is alien to that aspect of the divine which finds an impoverished form and fulfillment in their celebrations - a divine that comes as blood flowing *over and above*. The truth of father and son assails her, wounds her in that place where she remains excluded from the manifestations of their faith, though she is not necessarily far outside their tradition. Her fidelity to that tradition is shown in a sensual experience for which the words, the rites, the historic

interpretation of the texts, are inadequate. It finds expression in a bodily immediacy that no mediation the woman knows can effect.

In her turn, she fears not being believed, even by herself, and goes so far as to look for proofs and demonstrations! Nothing changes. No word comes, or at least none that matches her problem, her sense of abandonment (Irigaray, 1993: 25-26).

Irigaray describes the impoverishment of the female psyche in relation to notions of the Divine encoded within the Symbolic Order. Her analysand yearns towards the Divine even though she does take part in this *form* of the expression of belief. She feels abandoned by the symbolic structure of the patriarchal version of the Divine, from which she is excluded despite her own seemingly 'impoverished' spiritual sense. Irigaray's client has no other arena in which to express her sense of, and relation, to Divinity; as Irigaray points out, the client has a 'fidelity to that tradition', but her 'sensual experience' of shedding blood at the same moment that the male-constructed Divine symbolically sheds blood has no means of expression outside the order of religion in which it is placed. 'The words, the rites, the historic interpretations' do not express her sensual - and yet spiritual - experience. In other words, Irigaray's analysand has no means in which she can express her personal spirituality other than those of a Symbolic Order from which she is excluded. It seems an emotionally tragic situation. It is my firm contention that this is the sense that inspires the need for women's spirituality outside of the patriarchal arena, an arena which has shown that it is impervious to the need of women to find a sense of the feminine divine.

The aim of this thesis is to explore what space there lies for the numinous female outside the dichotomy of patriarchal/feminist discussion. I seek to go beyond

the academic, philosophical and spiritual boundaries of Christianity and the patriarchy because I believe that these forms are neither fluid, nor groundbreaking enough to adequately describe - or indeed to engage with - women's reality. Irigaray's analysand hauntingly demonstrates the place (or rather displacement) of the feminine spirit *within* the patriarchy, *according* to the patriarchy, and the sense of alienation as the spark of the female divine watches herself being excluded from a place in which there is no expression for her being. This is a space which tells her 'you are not wanted here', where - in effect - she does not exist. Regina Fischer, the heroine of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, experiences a more protracted and extreme form of non-belonging than Irigaray's analysand, but its origin is the same - the patriarchal world into which she is born.

The Numinous Female in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*.

The world of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* is dominated by the Central European Catholic Church. According to the *Narratio Rei Admirabilis* (NRA), Regina Fischer is drawn into this world by her need to find work.² Regina is an enigma: a nineteen-year-old woman from a rural town, she is sent to Pressburg, which was even then (1641) a capital city and important to the life of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Gaibl's account of Regina in *Narratio Rei Admirabilis* (NRA) is blurred; although a

² Gaibl states: 'Unterdessen spricht die Tante des Mädchens. Bei der sich die jüngere Schwester schon befand, den Wunsch aus, Regina sollter ebenfalls zu ihr nach Pressburg kommen. Als Scheingrund wurde die Hilfeleistung im Häuslichen angegeben, in Wirklichkeit was es aber das Vorhaben, beide Mädchen wieder zum Übertritt zum lutherischen Glauben zu bewegen' ['Meanwhile the Aunt spoke for the young girls, the younger sister was already with her, that when she wished, Regina should also come to her in Pressburg. The pretext was that there was no domestic work in Halstadt, but the truth was that both girls were to be returned to the Lutheran faith'] (Gaihl, 1910: 96).

devout Catholic with a Catholic upbringing,³ Regina's religious allegiances are confused, her parents described as Lutherans who converted to Catholicism (Gaibl, 1910: 92). Gaibl describes Regina in glowing terms: she is gentle, fearsome, respectful, a devout follower of the Holy Mother, the Virgin Mary to whom she seems to have a special devotion. According to the documents on which Gaibl based his narrative, Regina is left at the end of her haunting with an especial understanding of spirit and flesh for a twenty-year-old woman, one which both Catholics and non-Catholics acknowledged.⁴

Regina Fischer's enigma is her un-real quality. I found it very difficult to read an 'ordinary' nineteen- to twenty-year-old woman in Gaibl's account. And it was this un-real sense of Regina that made me uneasy, suspicious, and even somewhat supercilious when trying to create a character from Gaibl's early twentieth-century pastiche. I *knew*, with that instinct that is so dramatically unquantifiable, that Regina 'really' could not have been like that. Observation of my own life, as well as those of friends, family, colleagues, showed me that 'real life' does not produce such a caricature of the 'perfect good girl'. My task, then, was to construct a living character from the stereotype, a character from whom a reader could garner a sense of Regina's own lived experience and her own position of personal authenticity within a repressive Symbolic Order and patriarchal hierarchy; or in other words, to create a site of resistance from within, and to demonstrate that that personal space, that

³ Gaibl states: 'Sie haben ihre zarte Tochter, wie auch deren jüngere Schwester im katholischen Glauben erzogen' ['(The parents) brought up their tender daughter, as well as her younger sister, in the Catholic faith.'] (Gaibl, 1910: 93).

⁴ Gaibl states: 'Sie is jetzt im zwansigsten Jahre und besitzt einen in ihrem Stande und Alter seltenen Verstande, eine Bescheidenhiet des Geistes und des Körpers, was nicht nur von den Katholiken, sondern auch von den Nichtkatholiken anerkannt wurde' ['She is now in her twentieth year and shows for her position and education an understanding of spirit and flesh that not only Catholics but non-Catholics acknowledge'] (Gaibl, 1910: 93).

‘authentic voice’,⁵ can exist in tandem with, and in opposition to, the social narrative that causes the female howl to emerge, whether we choose it to or not.

Several choices regarding the character herself had to be made before I could allow Regina to more or less shape herself through my writing of her.⁶ When dealing with culturally imposed stereotypes one is also dealing with the response to these stereotypes assumed by the individual. Was Regina ‘written’ as a ‘good girl’ in Gaibl’s account because she herself made an attempt to live the normative stereotype, or did she behave and feel as a woman does in reaction to, and in spite of, the social and cultural proscriptions placed upon her by the Symbolic Order in which she lives? This formed a profound conundrum in my awakening understanding of the character - was Regina a ‘good girl’, or not really?

Some amateur psychological observation on my behalf led me to believe that those individuals who attempt to live the few stereotypes we are given for ‘female’ and/or ‘male’ behaviour often - eventually - become disturbed and confined in these roles, despite their desires to act out their notions of perfection.⁷ My development of Regina as a character allowed me to posit her as flawed in the sense that her experiences prior to her arrival in Pressburg would leave a psychic space in her makeup for her ‘authentic voice’ to reveal itself. It was my understanding that a working woman from a low socio-economic background, from a cultural minority, would not have the limited space for free expression that a woman from different

⁵ I will discuss this notion further in this chapter and others.

⁶ In the practice of creative writing, dealing with characters on paper acts as a ‘magical spell’ that metaphorically conjures the ‘genie out of the bottle.’ (Please excuse the mixed cultural metaphors.) The author gives life to a character on paper, but if one acknowledges the notion that ‘thought precedes action’ (see Starhawk (1979), ‘Magical Symbols’, pp122-149 or Bonewits (1989), ‘Placebo Spells, the Switchboard, and Speculations on Explanations’, pp126-146) the act of writing the character gives life to the character. As the character continues to be written, it takes on a life of its own that is beyond the willful control of the author. This is where the ‘creative magic’ of writing lies, as the characters begin to act with their own consciousness that allows them full range of personal expression beyond the authorial intention. It often comes as quite a surprise to the author, who is left with an unruly character exhibiting tendencies that interrupt the author’s previously planned narrative flow and outcome.

circumstances would have. Furthering this notion, I then felt that I needed to make another decision about Regina's level of self-reflexiveness, her 'intelligence.' The stereotype of the brutalised and uneducated lower-class servant girl has been handed down to us through diverse literary genres, from the fairy tale of 'Cinderella' to the Gothic romance of *Jane Eyre*. The servant-girl character, whose only saving grace is a 'superior male,' settles into a role of 'happily ever after' once she has been liberated from her servitude, but it is unknown whether or not this happily ever after entails an equality with her liberator.

At this point in my imaginative reconstruction of Regina Fischer, I found Gayatri Spivak's notion of 'reading against the grain'⁸ coincided with my agenda of examining the Symbolic Order to find spaces that lie completely outside it as sites of female resistance and therefore growth. Rather than relying on a well-worn signifier that included the brutalised consciousness of Regina, I wanted to examine rather what was occurring in her personal psychic space, that inner chamber of the psyche that is, in my opinion, the 'authentic voice' of each individual human being. Regina can be aligned with Spivak's notion of the 'subaltern': she is poor, she is of the peasantry and the pre-industrial working-class, and she is of an ethnic minority that was derided in the Austro-Hungarian Imperial reign of the time.⁹ In my reading of Gaibl's narrative, the greatest and most striking 'moment of transgression' occurs when he describes Regina's uncanny and sudden wisdom: Gaibl states that '[Regina] is now in her twentieth year and shows for her position and education an understanding of spirit

⁷ see for instance Mitchell, 2001, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, and Friedan, 1963, *The Feminine Mystique*: pp30-60, pp61-70, pp112-131, pp245-268

⁸ As noted above, Spivak states: 'You can only read against the grain if misfits in the text signal the way. (These are sometimes called "moments of transgression")' (Spivak, 1988: 211).

⁹ Thorne (1997) notes that Slovaks were a despised ethnic minority one to two generations before Regina Fischer's time. Cambel et al (1987) describe the social structure of the Austro-Hungarian social and ethnic structures at length, and note the subaltern status of the Slovaks. A Croatian saying states that 'Slovaks are non-persons', which my Pressburger-born Great Aunt confirmed to me when she told me that Hungarians would say 'Slovakischen sind Toten' ['Slovaks are dead.'].]

and flesh that not only Catholics but non-Catholics acknowledge' (Gaibl, 1910: 93). Gaibl's description relies upon a narrative formula in which the female protagonist is 'saved', either by another human - usually the handsome and rich prince who recognizes her virtue/beauty/desperate condition - or by the Grace of God, and thereby initiated into an arcane and higher wisdom through an otherworldly and Divine Intervention (in other words, her knowledge is not her own). This narrative archetype relies on an outside force (most typically androcentrically symbolized) to liberate the female character from her essential flaw, her biological femininity. Such a 'moment of transgression', the admission of knowledge residing in a lower-class woman, re-oriented my reading of the *Narratio Rei Admirabilis*; I began to scrutinize Regina Fischer against the grain.¹⁰ This made it possible for me to invest knowledge and wisdom in the character, despite the notions that come down to us from stereotypes that signal such characters as fundamentally unable to create critical thinking for themselves through lack of education.

My 'transgressive' reading of Regina led me also to examine her relationship with the Holy Mother. Before Regina leaves her home, the apparition of Klement Zwespenbauer makes itself known to her (although she has no idea of his identity). During her journey to Pressburg by boat, the apparition shows itself again, causing great fear in Regina who then makes a vow: she promises the 'Beloved Mother of God that for the rest of her life she will honour and respect the Holy Mother . . . fast strictly every Saturday, forgoing all warm food, and before sleeping . . . conscientiously perform her prayers.'¹¹ At the end of Regina's tribulations, Gaibl

¹⁰ As Spivak points out, '[t]his is the greatest gift of deconstruction: to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralysing him [sic], persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility' (Spivak, 1988: 201).

¹¹ Gaibl states: 'Diese Erscheinungen versetzten das Gemüt der Jungfrau in grossen Schrecken und sie hätte sich jetzt, wie auch in der Zukunft, auf alle mögliche Art und Weise von diesen Belästigungen befreit. Um also die Hilfe Gottes zu erflehen, verpflichtete sie sich zu einem heiligen Gelübde: surch ihr ganzes Leben der lieben Mutter Gottes zu Ehren an allen Samstagen strenge zu fasten, sich der

describes an ecstatic vision in which Regina is touched by the Holy Mother, this vision manifesting to her as she prepares a small altar with one of the several unnamed, mysterious women who appear in Gaibl's text towards the end of his narrative.¹² According to the legend of the haunting, the Baroque Piéta on display in the St Martin's Cathedral in Bratislava was carved as a result of the apparitions and Regina's ecstatic vision. The reason for the apparition, according to Zary et al (1990), was that one Hans Clement,¹³ a burger from Pressburg, appeared shortly after his death in 1641 to seek help to atone for the murder of a man in which he had participated: his peace would be found when two hundred gulden of the money he had stolen from the man was returned to the church and a piéta he had commissioned to be carved as atonement should be finished and placed in St Martin's Cathedral whilst masses should be said for his soul.¹⁴ However, it is interesting to note that in Zary et

warmen Speisen zu enthalten, ausserdem noch täglich vir dem Schlafengehen gewisse Gebete zu verrichten' (Gaibl, 1910: 96).

¹² Gaibl states: 'Indem das Mädchen alles eifrig verichtet, erscheint, oh Wunder, die seligste Jungfrau mit vier Engeln un umgeben von reinstem Lichtglanze, der die Augen der Regina blendete, als sie die Erscheinung anblicken wollte. Jetzt befiehlt der Geist, das Mädchen solle die Hände vorerst der Königin des Himmels, dann aber den Engeln reichen und dasselbe solle auch die Anwesenden tun, wahrscheinlich als Zeichen der Hochachtung; die himmlishcen verschmäten nicht diesen Beweis der Hochachtung, den das Mädchen sah, dass auch jene ihre Hände entgegenreichten' ['Whilst the maiden performed all these [tasks] enthusiastically, there manifested, oh wonder, the most blissful Virgin with four angels and shone in such a clear white light that Regina's eyes were dazzled when she wanted to look upon the vision. Now the Spirit felt that Regina should take the hand of the Queen of Heaven for the moment, and then the angels, and all present should do the same, as a sign of greatest esteem; the Heavenly party did not scorn this sign of esteem, because the maiden [Regina] saw that [the Holy Mother] also had both of her hands outstretched'.] (Gaibl, 1910: 122-123).

¹³ According to Gaibl's account, the name of the returned man is 'Johannes Klement, volkstümlich Zwespenbauer gennant, deutscher Nation' ['Johannes Klement, commonly known as Zwespebnauer, of German nationality'] (Gaibl, 1910: 91). Zary et al identify the individual as 'Hans Clement,' a Pressburger citizen (Zary et al, 1990: 99).

¹⁴ Zary et al state: 'Die einzige bedeutendere Ausname bildet der Altar der Schmerzhafte Mutter, der seine Entstehung einer Erscheinungsgeschichte verdankt. Dieser zufolge soll Hans Clement, ein Preßburger Bürger, kurz nach senem Tode im Jahre 1641 mermahls als um Hilfe flehender Geist erschienen sein und mitgeteilt haben, daß er in seinem Leben für 200 Gulden einen Menschen ermordet habe und erst dann Ruhe finden werde wenn das Geld zurückgeben würde, und daß man eine Madonnenstatue für den Dom anfertigen lassen solle' ['The only significant exception is the Altar of the Sorrowing Mother, for whose origins we have to thank a history of an apparition. According to the this, shortly after his death in 1641, Hans Clement, a Pressburger citizen, appeared as an imploring ghost and explained that in his life he murdered a man for two hundred gulden and would only find peace when the money was given back and that a Pieta was finished for the St Martin's Cathedral'] (Zary et al, 1990: 99).

al's account there is no mention of Regina Fischer, just as there is no mention of the Piéta in Gaibl's text.

Nevertheless, the powerful presence of the Catholic Christian Virgin Mother of God cannot be ignored throughout Gaibl's narrative. In particular, Regina is portrayed as a 'maiden' with a singular devotion to the Holy Mother. The Cult of the Virgin Mary was particularly strong in the seventeenth century,¹⁵ but the emphasis on the presence of the 'Holy Mother' in Gaibl's account also led me to read 'against the grain'. Indeed, from my point of view as a twenty-first century, feminist scholar it is quite plausible to read Gaibl's 'Holy Mother' as a Christian appropriation of the figure of the Pagan Goddess. Although, as Jones and Pennick state, 'Christianity was vehemently opposed to the worship of goddesses' (Jones and Pennick, 1995: 75), there is ample evidence from a variety of sources that the Catholic figure of the Holy Mother of God was an incorporation of the Pagan Fertility Goddess by the Church to allow transition from Pagan to Christian symbolism and thus conversion.¹⁶ This phenomenon was spread throughout Europe, Central and Eastern Europe having their own pre-Christian shamanistic traditions that included worship of both male and female deities.¹⁷ There is evidence that these practices continued up until the Soviet

¹⁵ I will discuss this in further chapters.

¹⁶ According to Jones and Pennick, 'one of the earliest churches dedicated to Mary Mother of God was on the site of the temple of Diana at Ephesus. A synod held at Ephesus in 431[CE] first designated Mary as Mother of God . . . St Augustine proposed the "christening" of Pagan objects as well as of Pagan people, to convert them to Christian use. Notoriously, in 601[CE] Pope Gregory I advised his missionaries in northern Europe to do the same thing with holy places . . . During the following centuries, Church directives become full of orders to Christian priests not to allow, for example, "carols" of dancing and singing, especially by young women, in their churches . . . The orders were mixed and *ad hoc*, because they were fighting against the inevitable' (Jones and Pennick, 1995: 75-6).

¹⁷ Jones and Pennick note that '[i]n Slovakia, the chief god was Praboh, closely associated with the goddess of life Zivena. She was counterposed with a death-goddess, Morena. Agriculture was the realm of Uroda, goddess of the fields, and Lada, goddess of beauty. As in the rest of Europe, the thunder-god Parom was revered universally. The Bieloknazi (White Priests) served and invoked the white gods, whilst the Black Priests practised magic. The Slovaks have their imagery of light and darkness in common with the Russians . . . although such a stark contrast is generally foreign to Pagan pantheons, which see all forces as having their place in the natural order' (Jones and Pennick, 1995: 187).

Communist appropriation of the region,¹⁸ indicating an unbroken line of pagan and shamanistic activity that included the worship of the Divine Female as a more complex 'character' than the single symbol of the Virgin Mother of God. Thus the concept of the Divine Female in the formation of the character of Regina Fischer incorporates a consciousness that not only includes the Catholic 'Holy Virgin' but allows a broader spectrum of symbolic 'female' character traits within the Divine. In this sense the 'Holy Mother' of Regina's dialogue is Immanent Goddess rather than Transcendent Virgin Mother; as Immanent Goddess the character of the Holy Mother therefore incorporates both the Pagan Fertility Goddess of pre-Christian spiritual tradition, as well as elements of contemporary Goddess spirituality. Regina Fischer's dialogue with the numinous in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* therefore involves a dialogue with both the patriarchal Symbolic Order (or the Catholic Church), and with its antithesis, the Immanent Goddess.

Constructs of the Divine: From the Symbolic Order to a Completely Different Realm/to the Realm of the Goddess

The Catholic Church of Regina Fischer's time (the mid-1600s) was an all-pervasive socio-political institution, defined by the exclusion of women from its hierarchy of power, and by its proscribed notion of the female, or the feminine.¹⁹ However, in

¹⁸ Bonewits documents the history and perpetuation of shamanic practices in Europe. According to Bonewits: 'research done by Russian and Eastern European folklorists, anthropologists and musicologists among the Baltic peoples of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia indicates that Paleopagan traditions may have survived in small villages, hidden in the woods and swamps, even into the current century! Some of these villages still had people dressing up in long white robes and going out to sacred groves to do ceremonies, as recently as World War Two!' (Bonewits, 2001: 'Indo-European Paleopaganism and its Clergy 1.6, <http://www.neopagan.net/IE_Paleopaganism.HTML>).

¹⁹ The notion of 'woman' within the Catholic Church was encompassed, within Timothy's edict, as follows: 'Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor' (I Tim. 2:11-14).

Western spiritual and religious tradition, many female and feminist scholars and mystics from Dame Julian of Norwich²⁰ to Elizabeth Cady Stanton,²¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza²² and Marla Selvidge²³ have contextualized the female and the feminine within the structures of the Christian Church. The early Christian Church held women in the same esteem as men, both genders holding pastoral positions in the Church's outreaches and parishes. By the third century however, the Christian Church had moved from its essentially private sphere into a public sphere where women held little value as figureheads. As an 'underground' and mostly illegal movement, early Christian practices were carried out in private homes, with little liturgical structure and a less hierarchical, more flexible practice. The private sphere of the home, where women held considerable currency in spiritual as well as domestic life, was overshadowed by the public sphere of formal ritual and formal participation, an arena in which women were not encouraged to participate.²⁴ Eventually, women's public role in the Church was confined to female ascetics (both lay women and nuns), who came to be seen as transcending their female, essentially base, (sexual) natures, and were praised as men.²⁵ However, women were excluded from positions of power in the Church hierarchy, and even mosaics which portrayed female bishops were defaced or re-named with masculine names (Torjesen, 1993: 155-172). The foundations for

²⁰ Despite the masculinised spelling of the name, Dame Julian of Norwich was a fourteenth century female theologian.

²¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a nineteenth century suffragette who created *The Woman's Bible*, a text which re-worked the Christian Bible with a female centred point of view.

²² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is a twentieth century Christian feminist scholar.

²³ Marla Selvidge is a twentieth century feminist and religious scholar.

²⁴ According to Torjesen, '[a]s Christianity entered the public sphere, male leaders began to demand the same subjugation of women in the churches as prevailed in Greco-Roman society at large. Their detractors reproached women leaders, often in strident rhetoric, for operating outside the domestic sphere and thus violating their nature and society's vital moral codes. How could they remain virtuous women, the critics demanded, while being active in public life?' (Torjesen, 1993: 37-8).

²⁵ According to Torjesen, '[b]y renouncing the body and sexuality and following ascetic ideals, women in effect transcended their femaleness. The mastery of the passions and the body has long been a masculine enterprise. Now ascetic women who were able to sustain the physical rigours of fasting could be praised for demonstrating masculine virility. Female ascetics who repudiated both their

the Catholic Church - the lynchpin of the patriarchal Symbolic Order of Regina Fischer's time - had been laid.

In our own time, women's spirituality in the Western tradition has been subjected to intense feminist theorisation, which can be broadly categorised into two contradicting paradigms. Within the church structure, Christian feminists are working to liberate the status of the female through the movement for the ordination of women as clergy, and through feminist reinterpretation of the Bible. This seeks to engage in a hermeneutics of women within biblical accounts and to lift these accounts from what Schüssler Fiorenza describes as 'sexist, racist, and class/property-based interpretations' (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1984: 18). Schüssler Fiorenza terms this a 'liberation theology', where women within the patriarchal structure seek their woman-identities within the structure and therefore give voice and liberate their selves. Feminist theology, Schüssler Fiorenza argues, introduces a radical philosophical shift into mainstream Christian thinking, as it veers away from the church as a male institution, from the Bible as a whole and literal text, and from the patriarchal tradition of Christianity towards 'women in the churches . . . the liberating Word of God finding expression in the biblical writings . . . [and] the feminist transformation of Christian traditions' (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1984: 3-4).²⁶

In contrast, emerging voices of the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the USA, began to open up and explore debates about female spirituality outside traditional religious structures and historical contexts. According to Charlene Spretnak 'the catalysts for the "new" spirituality . . . drew from the oldest [pre-patriarchal] forms of religion in human history' (Spretnak, 1982: xi). The

reproductive sexuality and their social roles became, so to speak, 'honorary' males' (Torjesen, 1993: 210-11).

'Founding Foremothers of the Movement' (Spretnak, 1982: title page) investigated areas of women's spiritual identification²⁷ while creative methods became intertwined with the expression of what I term 'woman's voice',²⁸ an integral part of the newly emerging women's movement of self-identification. The poet Ntozake Shange told us: 'i found god in myself / and i loved her / i loved her fiercely' (Shange in Spretnak, 1982: 3). Shange's words indicated a direct shift, not only in the perceived gender of divinity, but also in the emerging consciousness of the 'immanent' divine as opposed to the 'transcendent' divine. Female spirituality became a site of resistance as women who expressed a connection with the Divine shifted their focus from the transcendent male God of 'known' and accepted religions to a completely 'Other' concept - that of the Immanent Goddess.

The Immanent Goddess is described as a pantheistic concept. The Immanent Goddess resides within all life; She is within us as well as without us, expressed through nature and the relationship of humanity with nature.²⁹ Unlike the transcendent God, who resides in his heaven, far removed from humankind and unable to communicate with us without an intermediary (Christ or Christ's representative on earth, the priest), the Immanent Goddess resides in each human and indeed, in each living thing. Thus, nature and divinity merge in Goddess spirituality to encompass all life as connected and equal, which eradicates the need for a hierarchy of 'dominion'.³⁰

²⁶ According to Torjesen, 'Christian churches need to return to their own authentic heritage, reject the patriarchal norms of the Greco-Roman gender system, and restore women to equal partnership in the leadership of the church and participation in Christian life' (Torjesen, 1993: 268-9).

²⁷ See for instance Stone, (1976) *When God was a Woman*; Gimbutas, (1974) *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe: 7000 to 3500BC*; Goldenberg, (1979) *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*.

²⁸ The notion of 'woman's voice' will be explored further in my discussion of *écriture féminine* in Chapter Three.

²⁹ The notion of the Immanent Goddess is most succinctly articulated in Janet and Stewart Farrar's version of the 'Charge of the Star Goddess' (see Appendix One).

³⁰ This contrasts to the opinion expressed in Genesis 1:24-26: 'Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth all kinds of living creatures: cattle, creeping things, and wild animals of all kinds." And so it happened; God made all kinds of wild animals, all kinds of cattle, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. God saw how good it was. Then God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our

Goddess spirituality is also more aligned with postmodern feminist theories of difference³¹ that strive not to delimit 'the feminine' or categorize 'an essence of Goddess'. Rather, Goddess spirituality uses a metaphor that reflects feminist difference theory and the notion that although 'female' as a biological entity exists (as does 'male') in nature, there is no one 'essence' of female or male, and rather that all concepts of 'female' are linked with the numinous and the Divine. The metaphor of the 'Goddess of Ten Thousand Faces'³² explores not only the notion of difference between female and male, but also the difference between females and female response. The term 'Goddess of Ten Thousand Faces' refers to the notion that each female is an individual and not the product of a social construct of female. Thus the 'Goddess of Ten Thousand Faces' is at once one Deity and yet encompasses all differences that exist; the Goddess of the Ten Thousand Faces also exists as the Dark Goddess/Light Goddess as well as the triune of Maid, Mother and Crone. Although the Goddess manifests in many forms according to both racial and cultural backgrounds, She is still one form. Thus the metaphor describes the many different faces that the one Goddess will wear according to the situation and preferences of the practitioner. In summary, Goddess spirituality steps out of the arena where binary dualism (god/goddess, male/female, patriarchy/feminism) otherwise continues its stalemate.

likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.”

³¹ For example, Rosemarie Putnam Tong states that postmodern feminists describe woman's nature 'not as some sort of "thing-in-itself" to which all the "sensible properties" of "woman's nature" actually cling but as the "totality of properties, constituent elements," and so on without which it would be impossible consistently to refer to "woman's nature" at all . . . [In using de Lauretis's comparison of the notion of an essence of a triangle, Tong continues] Just as we have no access to a triangle as it exists in itself but only to the enormous variety of particular triangles we can conceive of, we have no access to woman as she exists in herself. Yet in the same way we can recognize a triangle, we know a woman when we see one' (Tong, 1998: 208-9).

³² The term is used extensively by the Fellowship of Isis, an Irish foundation that honours the Goddess of the Ten Thousand Faces as the primary Immanent Deity. According to the Fellowship, '[t]he Goddess is seen as Deity, the Divine Mother of all beings' (FOI Homepage: <<http://www.fellowshipofisis.com/intro.html>>).

Most importantly, Goddess spirituality merges nature, divinity and life. All life is considered sacred and therefore a reverence for ecology constitutes a profound part of the practice of Goddess spirituality as well as its theory. In contrast, mainstream feminist theory sees any connection between 'woman' and 'nature' as essentialising and confining the concept of 'woman' to a position that historically has been seen as demeaning and 'Othering'. In this sense, Goddess spirituality is seen as a form of ecofeminism, where 'women celebrate the nature-woman connection at their own peril, for [according to Simone de Beauvoir] "that's the formula used to try and keep women quiet"' (Tong, 1998: 273). However, Goddess spirituality operates on a different level to this debate. It does not seek to engage in the arena where binary definitions such as nature/culture, woman/man, apply and instead seeks to find a platform that is beyond western concepts of binary dualism, away from androcentric notions of us/them. Nevertheless, Goddess spirituality draws heavily on some Wiccan concepts,³³ the most prominent being the notion of witchcraft.

In pre-industrial times the village 'witch', or cunning-woman, was a healer. Ehrenreich and English point out the connection between women as healers and the utilization of natural materials for healing.³⁴ That such women healers were

³³ Witchcraft as Wicca has emerged as a popular new 'spiritual path', rather than a religion. Following from New Age exploration of shamanistic practices, Wicca draws heavily on Celtic mythology and Druidic practices, and amalgamates symbols that come from a wide variety of esoteric and occult forms. The basic principle of Wicca develops around the cycle of the year as expressed through the seasons and seasonal changes and the notion of binary Deity, the God and the Goddess. Wicca is what is termed an 'earth-based' religion, embracing duality such male/female, light/dark, within/without, but giving each opposition equal weight and equal importance. However Wicca is heavily reliant upon hierarchical forms which in my opinion do little to break with androcentric religious forms; a traditional Wiccan coven makes use of orders such as High Priestess and Priest and varying degrees of Initiation. This practice of Wicca may be seen as a reaction to mainstream androcentric religion, its resistance still engaging with forms of practice that may not be conducive to feminist notions of self-empowerment rather than exploring other means of resistance and empowerment.

³⁴ Ehrenreich and English state: 'Women have always been healers. They were the unlicensed doctors and anatomists of western history. They were the abortionists, nurses and counsellors. They were pharmacists, cultivating healing herbs and exchanging the secrets of their uses. They were midwives, travelling from home to home and village to village. For centuries women were doctors without degrees, barred from books and lectures, learning from each other, and passing on experience from neighbour to neighbour and mother to daughter. They were called 'wise women' by the people,

discredited by the androcentric medical profession is a well-documented phenomenon; the transition from village healer to witch has been seen as the transition from a world where women's traditional expertise was valued within their societies to one where it was demonised.³⁵ Members of the women's spirituality movement of the 1970s and 1980s increasingly reclaimed the word 'witch' to apply to themselves as practitioners of a spiritual path that was seeking to define itself outside of the Judeo-Christian-patriarchal religious structure.³⁶ In *Beyond God the Father* (1986), Mary Daly turned to language and notions of the liberation of language in the search for a female space outside of the androcentric structure.³⁷ Through the act of 'reclaiming' - of etymology, of practices that involve beliefs of immanence through ecology, of study of the Goddess archetype that is termed *thealogy* (Goldenberg, in Spretnak, 1982: 215) - feminist spirituality outside traditional religious structures seeks to empower itself against the limitations of patriarchal definition and thus escape this particular arena.³⁸

witches or charlatans by the authorities. Medicine is part of our heritage as women, our history, our birthright' (Ehrenreich and English, 1973: 3).

³⁵ See for instance Ehrenreich and English (1973) pp12-20 and Jong (1981).

³⁶ 'You are a Witch,' claimed the New York Coven in 1970, 'by saying aloud, "I am a Witch" three times, and *thinking about that*. You are a Witch be being female, untamed, angry, joyous, and immortal'(WITCH, in Spretnak, 1982: 429).

³⁷ Daly states: 'Women moving beyond god the father find that the mysticism of words is twined with the mysticism of creation. Wording is one fundamental was of Be-Witching - Sparking women to the insights and actions that change our lives. Wording is expression of shape-shifting powers. Weaving meanings and rhythms, unleashing Original forces/sources. Arranging words to convey their Archaic meanings, Websters release them from cells of conventional senses.

'Releasing words to race together, Websters become Muses. We do not use words; we Muse words. Metapatterning women and words have magical powers, opening doorways of memories, transforming spaces and times. Rhymes, alliterations, alterations of senses - all aid in the breaking of fatherland's fences. Thus liberation is the work of Wicked Grammar, which is a basic instrument, our Witches' Hammer.

'Wicked women strive to overcome the amnesia, aphasia, and apraxia inflicted by phallocracy. We actively pronounce certain ideologies, institutions, practices to be blameworthy and evil. This pronouncing/denouncing portends the end of such evil, auguring and Other reality' (Daly, 1986: xxv).

³⁸ Lynne Hume has articulated the relationship between witchcraft and Goddess spirituality as follows: 'To those who identify themselves as witches today, the symbolism of the witch transcends phallogocentric imagery and conveys the image of an independent, anti-establishment, political, spiritual and magical being. They feel that the witch hunts of the Middle Ages were the epitome of misogyny and are now intent on correcting that image. Many women witches believe that women can only be fully liberated through a legitimization and celebration of the female in a specifically female spiritual

Above all Goddess spirituality seeks to step outside the binarisms that are inherent in 'mainstream' religious practices, be they conservative or radical. Goddess spirituality seeks its own forms and its own 'language', and therefore its own validity in its own terms. It has been suggested to me that the Goddess is no longer the 'ancient Mother' (and thus remaining transcendent rather than immanent) that much of Wicca and other Pagan thought relies on; Goddess is also sister and daughter, as practitioners of Goddess Spirituality birth Goddess into the world themselves.³⁹ This concept of deity, of Immanent Deity, presents a vast challenge to the notion of transcendent deity, of God/Goddess without and above.

Immanence, the Body, *Jouissance* and Beyond

The concept of 'immanence' is not easy to theorize. Immanence and the Immanent Goddess do not belong in a Symbolic Order which is structured through binary oppositions. To posit the Immanent Goddess through words and forms that are structured and informed by this Symbolic Order is therefore both difficult and problematic. 'Immanence' denotes the inherence of Spirit throughout all without exception, and from this perspective it is difficult to accept the limitations and inequalities in binary oppositions, such as God/Goddess, authority/minority, strong/weak, man/woman. Immanence is a radical point of departure from the Symbolic Order of the patriarchal world view and equally is seen as a discountable oddity or a danger to this Order. This is a reason why the Immanent Goddess holds

context. Thus feminist theory is put into feminist praxis. The Goddess is felt both physically and emotionally. Some even go as far as to say that finding the goddess may result in not only women's spiritual salvation but also the salvation of the Earth. To these women, the Goddess evokes an intense emotional experience, vindicates women's equality and makes male bias in mainstream religions look like the spiteful tantrums of naughty boys' (Hume, 1997: 87-88).

³⁹ With thanks to my friend Sandra Daly for laying the foundation for this concept.

little currency in traditional theology, why the uncontained Feminine Divine poses such a threat that She must be destroyed.

The *Narratio Rei Admirabilis* makes a very short mention of Regina's Fischer's dangerous position in her world; one sentence describes how non-Catholics in particular were 'keeping notes' to expose 'fairy-tales, magic, or the devil's work'.⁴⁰ Regina Fischer is a threat to her world: either she is engaging in 'devil's work' and thus a candidate for death, or someone must create of her a pseudo-saint, an office so powerful within the religious Symbolic Order that it rescues her from the threat of such punishment. The *Narratio Rei Admirabilis* itself creates this either/or situation. In this instance, the raw material that it provides for fictional treatment (the brief mention of notekeeping by the non-Catholics) merely alludes to the wealth of complexity that lies beneath the surface of the text for the creative writer to mine. We know that Regina Fischer was not destroyed (burnt as a witch), despite the precariousness of her situation. The *NRA* text suggests that Regina is 'saved' because of her devotion to the Holy Mother of God; indeed, Regina is marked out as 'supra-normal' - a rare privilege for a young woman of her class - because the Holy Mother stretches out Her hands to the woman and causes her to experience Divine Ecstasy (Gaibl, 1910: 122-3). Thus the *NRA* text suggests that Divine Ecstasy is the binary opposite of Death by Divine Purge, the cleansing of the world of 'teufelswerk'. Regina Fischer becomes the embodiment of a stark theological contrast: saint/witch, a pair which is markedly reminiscent of another signifier that is often used in reference to the notion of 'woman' - madonna/whore.

It would be redundant to rely upon these classifications when the project of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* is to explore what sites there are that lie outside the

⁴⁰ Gaibl states: 'Besonders die Nichtkatholiken hielten dies alles für blosse Märchen, Zaubereien oder Teufelswerk' (Gaibl, 1910: 101).

social normative values of western patriarchy. My choice to posit Regina Fischer's own point of view outside the traditional representations of 'woman' and 'woman's role' stems from the need to problematize the concept of Divine Feminine. *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* links the notion of an atavistic Fertility Goddess to the Holy Virgin Mother, and so broadens not only the general perception of the Divine Feminine, but also the relationship of the novel's characters to the Divine Feminine. Thus entities that once could be theorized as binary opposites come together and create a site that moves away from, and thus resists, the limits of patriarchal discourse.

Traditional theology posits salvation as the transcendence of the soul from the body. Thus the body becomes the lesser (and less worthy) part of the body/soul dichotomy.⁴¹ To problematize this notion of body/soul is to immediately search for a 'way out' - to create a site of resistance to the Symbolic Order that binds and limits the experiences of the body and the soul to either a completely materialistic realm or a completely numinous realm, again another example of the problem of the grip of binary dichotomies. Alternatively, if the problem of body/soul is approached in terms of Immanence, where body and soul contain each other and cannot be separate, another space is created where boundaries become blurred and separation becomes an impossible and irrelevant task. This space is removed from the Symbolic Order of patriarchy and thus does not engage with the stalemate that binarism can create. Instead of the 'weaker' part of the binary pair struggling for resistance against, and independence from, the 'stronger' part, such classifications dissolve and the new entity occupies another realm of expression altogether. At this point a discussion of notions of *jouissance*, and their intersection with notions of Divine Immanence in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, is relevant

In Bratislava, within a kilometre of St Martin's Cathedral, is another Baroque structure, the Jesuit's Church. This church is known for its vast painting of God the Father that hangs high over the altar; God the Father, stretching out His arms over His flock, pink-skinned, white-bearded, on a cloud set in a glorious blue sky; a symbol, perhaps *the* symbol, of western patriarchal concepts of the Divine. The congregation must strain to look up at God, who at the same time looks down on the congregation. The priests and ministrants perform the mass directly beneath God, under God's stretched out arms, representatives of the symbol of the Divine that rises above them. In the epilogue of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, the narrator (myself) describes a moment of clarity during a High Mass:

It was the same feeling I had when I went to a Mass at the Cathedral of My Family's Miracles and saw the rows and rows of young men proceed in, dressed in their lace vestments with their great big Nikes and Reeboks poking out from under their hems. Something deep inside my belly was screeching out; *where am I in all this?* I was conscious at the time that this was not a very 'good girl' thought to have. There was no layer of respectful feelings anywhere in that cry (Thomas b: 334).

Irigaray's analysand also experiences such a moment of crisis during her dream where 'no words come to match her sense of abandonment' (Irigaray, 1993: 25-6). What space is there for female expression of the Divine, where this sense of abandonment, this sense of knowledge of being the 'Other' deep in the center of the patriarchal Symbolic Order, is stepped away from so that something else, something more 'true' to the individual experience and expression may come forth?

⁴¹ This dynamic is reflected in the relegation of 'woman' to the madonna/whore binarism.

The Piéta in the St Martin's Cathedral that is attached to the story of Regina Fischer's haunting operates on a different symbolic level. Although as richly carved as God the Father is painted, the Piéta captures a tragic and very personal moment: the Holy Mother cradling the body of her dead son. The eyes of the mother are fixed upon her son's face, her body leans toward him. Viewing this sculpture is different from viewing the painting of God the Father. The painting leaves one with a sense of smallness; the Piéta, on the other hand, depicts a private moment of sorrow. One becomes an unwitting voyeur of grief. And yet, whilst meditating on the Piéta, I recorded this in my journal:

Dark/New Moon ; Mabon time. We went in to mass and Klara told me to pray to the Holy Mother. So. I knelt before the piéta and had a chat with Goddess. All of a sudden I felt that flower blossom circle around me burst into bloom, and a concentrated circular energy pattern coming from the piéta itself. It was so lovely. Then I felt I saw a tear coming from the Holy Mother's eye, so I found myself studying the piéta as well. I noticed how Her hand was cupped around Her son's head, and suddenly the message came, 'a woman loves with her whole body' . . . that feeling of bodily communication; but it works for all things and people; female energy comes through touch, as well as everywhere else. It all makes sense within my womb and my skin, and on paper and on screen it doesn't flow so well (Thomas a: np).

The symbolic action of the Piéta is different from the symbolic action of the painting, God the Father. For me, the Piéta created a direct experience of the self through the recognition of, and connection with, the female body of the Holy Mother/Goddess. Thus immanence entered this experience, as opposed to the transcendence that

presumably is the aim of the God the Father painting. This experience of connection with the Divine Feminine can be said to incorporate the notion of *jouissance* as well as notions of the numinous and of the physical, again dissolving the boundaries between the dichotomy of sexual/spiritual, and body/soul.

The term *jouissance* has come to refer to sexual ecstasy. Clément and Cixous, however, maintain that the term *jouissance* connotes rather a broader sense of 'enjoyment'. *Jouissance* is:

'a word with *simultaneously* sexual, political, and economic overtones. Total access, total participation, as well as total ecstasy are implied. At the simplest level of meaning - metaphorical - woman's capacity for multiple orgasm indicates that she has the potential to attain something more than Total, something extra - abundance and waste (a cultural throwaway), Real and unrepresentable' (Cixous and Clément, 1986: 165).

This being the case, *jouissance* can be said to be very close to the concept of immanence, and the relationship between physical *jouissance* as 'feminine' and immanence as Divine Feminine can intertwine to create a strong space of 'feminine' empowerment. Rather than the 'something more than Total' being a cultural throwaway and therefore a waste, the immanence-*jouissance* experience can go beyond 'cultural thinking' and create a separate, numinous-physical experience of the self and the self within its environment.

Jouissance, energy and character relationships in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*

It is this notion of dissolving the barriers between dichotomies and creating a separate numinous-physical, *jouissant*-immanent space that is the project of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*. Although the protagonist of the story, Regina Fischer, is the main locus of the above function in the text, there are other elements in the text that are caught up in the same function. It would have been easy to posit the story of Regina Fischer, the historical person, within a narrative of binary opposition - a young woman, of low class and little education, who experiences a series of traumatic supernatural/psychic events, is accused of 'Devil's Work' and becomes, ultimately, a pawn in the political inveiglement of two religious camps.⁴² It would have been simple to make of Regina Fischer a victim, yet this would have created of her a hollow character based on an assumption that she was as un-complex as her biographer Gaibl describes her. Regina Fischer's complexity as a fictional character needed to be born of something other than her position in society and the female roles that were matched to her, the roles that her personality was made to fit. Reading against the grain once more, the 'misfit that signaled the way' into Regina's psyche was her relationship to the Holy Mother and the function of immanence. And in this reading, the characters that surrounded her were also drawn into the boundary-

⁴² During the Reformation era in Central Europe (including Slovakia), the Catholic and Lutheran faiths were in a state of spiritual and political war with each other. Gaibl alludes to this only in two brief comments: 'Unterdessen spricht die Tante des Mädchens. Bei der sich die jüngere Schwester schon befand, den Wunsch aus, Regina sollter ebenfalls zu ihr nach Pressburg kommen. Als Scheingrund wurde die Hilfeleistung im Häuslichen angegeben, in Wirklichkeit was es aber das Vorhaben, beide Mädchen wieder zum Übertritt zum lutherischen Glauben zu bewegen' ['Meanwhile the Aunt spoke for the young girls, the younger sister was already with her, that when she wished, Regina should also come to her in Pressburg. The pretext was that there was no domestic work in Halstadt, but the truth was that both girls were to be returned to the Lutheran faith.'] (Gaihl, 1910: 96) and 'Besonders die Nichtkatholiken hielten dies alles für blosse Märchen, Zaubereien oder Teufelswerk' ['Meanwhile the

dissolving function and escaped - for the most part - the roles that they too were trimmed/shaved to fit.

Creating the character of Regina presented another challenge. To place a vivid and complex personality in an environment simplified into a dualist schema would result in an uneven text. Throughout the writing of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, the need to scrutinize the characters surrounding Regina Fischer was also a constant task. Whilst the personalities within Regina's environment were more likely to conform to social mores, or to believe within themselves that they were acting in accordance to what was 'proper' to them and their society at large, it became a problem to write them as stereotypes, as ciphers to describe a 'way of being' that was ideological rather than based in verisimilitude. The unnamed cleric⁴³ became such a challenge. The cleric, or 'Ghostwriter', is the fictional embodiment of patriarchal, ecclesiastical power and the ideal foil to Regina's embodiment as female victim. However, as pointed out by Susan Hancock (2000), a passive central character who, through inaction, allows the environment to shape and change around herself/himself, creates a narrative which is lacking in energy and thus not innovative. Moreover, two such passive heroic characters (or a passive central character and an antagonistic secondary character), can only interact in terms of clash and withdrawal. This, according to Hancock, leads to a reliance on a third trickster character to shift the action through the narrative, outside the engagement of the protagonist and antagonist. The action therefore moves around the main character, rather than the main characters creating the necessary change to allow action to move through them. The characters, in other words, do not develop themselves.

non-Catholics were taking notes to expose the girl for fairy-tales, magic or Devil's Work.'] (Gaibl, 1910:101)

⁴³ The cleric is unnamed in the novel, but I have termed him the 'Ghostwriter' for analytical purposes in this exegesis.

Given this, I could perceive how the relationship between Regina and the Ghostwriter needed to evolve. Within Hancock's schema, Regina could be seen as the passive central protagonist and the Ghostwriter as the antagonistic secondary character. The relationship between the two would be shifted by the events surrounding them - Regina's traumatic haunting and the Ghostwriter's need to make a coherent narrative from her story. The outside action would be the actual writing of Regina's story by the Ghostwriter, specifically how her environment - rather than she herself - perceived the haunting. The trickster character who would shift the action could be either the ghost, Klement Zwespenbauer, or Regina's sister, Magdalena, or Regina's Aunt, or the three cunning-women, or the Graf for whom Regina works, or the various clerics and nuns who keep watch over her. Regina and the Ghostwriter would therefore be locked forever into the binary opposition of intellect/ignorance, priest/mendicant, sacred/mundane, man/woman. However, not only would this creative tactic be repeating the cycle of binary opposition and thus causing the stalemate of power struggle to continue, it would also remain in an area from which I believed that narrative needed to grow and change.

According to Hancock's schema, the evolution of narrative comes through the energy between character relationships, the dramatic tension between characters that leads to effective change, of the situation and of the characters themselves. In relationship to *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, this energy and growth can be seen in the fictional enactment of both immanence and *jouissance*, not only in the form of the Holy Mother, but also in the changes wrought in the characters through their varying relationships with the symbolic and real figure of the Holy Mother.

Immanence/*jouissance*: from myth to a ‘reality’

In *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, Regina Fischer's relationship with the Holy Mother is complex and longstanding. When she is a child, she finds comfort in her own mother and surrogate mother, Oma Rosa, the village cunning-woman. In her child's mind, Regina associates the statue of the Holy Mother used in village religious processions⁴⁴ with both living women (Thomas a: 49-50). This association blurs the distinct division of spirit/body and although in the child's mind the notion of ‘Holy Mother’ or ‘Goddess’ are still outside the body of Regina's self, the connection of body-spirit is established in the form of close and personal relationship. In terms of immanence, the idea that ‘Holy Mother/Goddess’ is at once a physical entity and a numinous concept links with the idea that *jouissance* is a simultaneous experience of pleasure. In the child Regina's world, *jouissance* is experienced in the security of the female world (her mother and sister) and knowledge (Oma Rosa), and counterposed with her fear of the masculine world, which she has just begun to encounter. Regina's desire-ambition to be ‘near the Holy Mother [to have Her] read my soul and my heart and to speak to me’ (Thomas b: 49-50) stems from the combination of physical and spiritual longings. In this way, Regina's sense of Holy Mother/Goddess Immanence, or the Divine, is established, from which she does not shift despite later attempts at indoctrination. Regina's experience of *jouissance* also stems from her early experience of the ‘female’ world - mother, sister, surrogate mother - in that her own perception of femininity is spread across four different role-models: mother - physical expression, sister - emotional expression, surrogate mother - knowledge/psychic expression, Holy Mother/Goddess - numinous expression. In this way, immanence

⁴⁴ It can be posited that at the time the rural religious processions were still a mixture of Christian and Pagan traditions, and more so then than now.

and *jouissance* combine within Regina's psyche to create a safe space that is not held captive (yet) by the imposition of patriarchal ideas and values. In terms of Goddess spirituality, Goddess is working within and without and through Regina.

This also raises the notion of the engagement of the Holy Mother/Goddess within and without the text itself. It is often said and/or felt that the transcendent God-the-Father is unreachable, unknowable and unable to 'talk back' to his petitioner. In creating and writing a space which veers away from this notion of the numinous and Divine being so divorced from the physical experience of humans, and thus creating a site of resistance to the binary barrier which prevents a liminal transference between spirit/body, the text itself becomes a site of immanence. The Holy Mother/Goddess literally 'talks back' to Her petitioners. In her essay 'Belief Itself' (Irigaray, 1993), Irigaray speaks of the veil of the body that separates mother and child, a veil which acts as a primary mediator of communication, 'an inscription written in invisible ink on a fragment of body, skin, membrane, veil, colourless and unreadable until it interacts with the right substance, the matching body' (Irigaray, 1993: 36). In Irigaray's vivid schema, the means by which messages are carried across this veil are angels:

[Angels] come to give us news about the place where the divine presence may be found, speaking of the word made flesh, returning, awaited. These angels come down and go up, go up and come down in a vertical mediation, like that of the veil over the stage, which they claim as primary, and which, on this occasion, would go from highest to lowest, a structure permitting the movement to and fro, back and forth from heaven to earth, going from one to the other through the various containing layers, but upon which, apparently, *nothing is inscribed* (Irigaray, 1993: 36).

In *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, the presence of the Holy Mother/Goddess in the text creates a dialogue between not only numinous expression and the characters, but also between numinous expression and the reader. Whilst the characters might not be aware of the presence of the Holy Mother/Goddess answering their petitions, even their more minor, momentary pleas, the notion of immanence, of Goddess Within/Without, creates an invisible 'character' - the unseen force permeating throughout the consciousness of the text and its personalities. Rather than relying on Irigaray's seductive angelic messengers, who carry the word of the Divine through the osmosis of 'bodies, skins, membranes, mucuses,' (Irigaray, 1993: 36), the veils of spirit/body are no longer necessary as the immanence of Divinity within speaks to the immanence of Divinity without in footnotes which echo the edges of 'reality' from where this numinous communication can be taken part in.

The notion of a female-centred Divinity or Deity is one which creates a site of resistance for women within a patriarchal Symbolic Order. The Female Divine relies on an immanent function - rather than a transcendent function - which allows notions of the Divine into all areas of life, unmediated and easily accessible to female experience. Historical research has shown that the numinous female and the Divine Feminine have existed alongside the traditional Judeo-Christian patriarchal religious structure in Europe. Despite the attempts to either incorporate (and devalue) the numinous feminine or to suppress it, notions of the Feminine Divine have always existed as part of a subculture that *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* utilizes as part of the creation of a site of spiritual and expressive resistance to the patriarchal Symbolic Order. As part of the hiddenness of this spiritual subculture - and as part of the creation of a site of resistance - the language that expresses the numinous female is

not immediately evident but is stated through the medium of intimate, personal experience and voice.

Chapter Two

An Authentic Voice: Creating Sites of Resistance to Patriarchal History through Notions of the Interior Journey and Dialogue in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*

What is historically repressed, according to Michelet, holds its own future. Madmen, harlequins, tumblers, jugglers, carnies, mad-mothers, those excluded from society, are thus promoted to function as prophets, all the better prefiguring their group's future because they are banished from it for being from the past. A strange dialectic is set up in which going beyond is brought about by the actual gap between a lost past and a future that rediscovers it (Clément, 1986: 25).

It cannot be denied that the writing of a 'historical' text involves the filtering, analysis and reportage created by the writer's own thoughts and perceptions from the distance of time. Effectively, in taking the story of Regina Fischer and creating with it the novel, *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, I-the-writer am creating a narrative at the turn of the twenty-first century in the same way that Alexander Gaibl did at the turn of the twentieth century. And, as I explore further in this chapter, my own perceptions and knowledges inform *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* just as Gaibl's informed the *Narratio Rei Admirabilis oder Beschreibung Einer Wunderlichen Tat* (1910). Whilst it is a difficult self-criticism, my role as a writer cannot be seen as different to Gaibl's role, and neither Gaibl nor myself can be said to have created a 'true historical' text, or an accurate representation of events removed by the span of centuries from the both of us as writers of 'historical' texts. Both Gaibl and myself write through the

filters of our own times, and of our own personal, perhaps political, beliefs and commitments. Neither of us can be said to have any 'real' grip of what 'actually' happened to Regina Fischer, both writing from research of collected statements which have their own forms through telling and re-telling, and of the analysis of other writers and historians. It may not even be possible that the original accounts of the events documented in 1643 were accurate, for as Tony Thorne states:

Strange gaps and illogical links in the text may be due to the inarticulacy of the witness, compounded by editing or even wholesale reconstructing by the scribe. In inquisitorial procedures at that time, the quantity of evidence, so long as it went to support the charges laid, was more important than its quality, so inconsistencies were often not picked up and blatant untruths were sometimes allowed to pass unquestioned (Thorne, 1997: 39).

Given also the postmodern knowingness of the irrelevance of an 'absolute truth,' a challenge is presented to the writer of a text relying on historical 'fact'. How is it possible to create a text that utilizes commentary on the past (and in the case of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, commentary on the state of womanhood in the past) when the writing is created by a postmodern consciousness that is itself informed by contemporary forms and ways of knowing theory, analysis and synthesis? It is impossible for me to write a seventeenth-century text, for the one good reason that I was not there. Despite my research, which involved spending time on the site of the events in physical surroundings which may not have changed greatly since the early 1640s,⁴⁵ I the twenty-first century feminist writer and scholar cannot know what

⁴⁵ Perhaps also some attitudes may not have changed since then, since I maintained a sense of pernicious mistrust of revealing my feminist, Goddess-oriented self during my fieldwork in Slovakia. During my stay I indulged in a much-needed meditation session in the home of my Great Aunt who,

Regina Fischer experienced. Thus a problem can be defined, and the question may be asked: where am I writing from? And where does *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* come from? Certainly it does not come from 'historical' accuracy, since like a Chinese whisper, the narrative on which I have based my novel is a reportage from old accounts as well as the several differing accounts which I will discuss further in this chapter. Are the filters through which I am writing an indulgence in creative self-reflexivity, or does my version of Regina Fischer's story provide a resistant site in which something of female 'history', also known as 'herstory' can be revealed and presented for further thought?

In this chapter, I discuss how patriarchal historicity creates filters and constructs which shape History,⁴⁶ and how the notion of dialogue may be utilized to write back to history (or the lived historical experience). Specifically, I examine the creation of a narrative (*A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*) which aims not only to explore an analysis of historical events (the *NRA*), but also to create a site of resistance to prior narratives of those events (both the *NRA*, and the witness statements from 1643). This site I term the 'interior journey,' which disengages from binary dualism and the expectation that 'history' is filled with archetypes that reduce all subtle characteristics of historical players to binary polarities and thus, in fictional terms, flat and uninteresting characters. I also discuss some notions from Chapter One, mainly that of the numinous Immanent that transcends binary duality, in order to link notions of writing back to history with the creation of new feminist spaces for resistance and analysis in relation to *Narratio Rei Admirabilis*.

when bursting in on me and seeing my meditation candles, asked with clasped hands and haughty eyebrow, 'Do they have *Jehovah's Witnesses* and *Satanists* in Australia?'

⁴⁶ I use the word 'History' (with a capitalized 'H') to indicate 'history' in the sense of textualized narrative account based on primary and secondary sources.

In Search of Regina Fischer

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the most pressing difficulties (and therefore interests) in my reading of *Narratio Rei Admirabilis* was the lack of any comment at all from Regina Fischer herself. Indeed, when describing Regina's ecstatic visions, Gaibl himself writes that 'it would take too long to mention all that she told, also it is not necessary, here it is described in perfect agreement through God's arrangement what we can read over similar matters by other writers.'⁴⁷ This formed one of my most telling moments of 'reading against the grain,' in which the lack of concern for Regina Fischer's very words themselves signaled to me that the woman was being eradicated from the text and the narrative. A significant part of the research of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* involved the search for Regina Fischer as a crucial character in the course of events, to garner some evidence of her involvement as more than a conduit for the vicious whims of the penitent ghost, Johannes Klement Zwespenbauer.

As previously noted, Alexander Gaibl's *Narratio Rei Admirabilis oder Beschreibung Einer Wunderlichen Tat (NRA)* is a narrative about, and meditation upon, a series of events that occurred in Bratislava in the mid-seventeenth century. Gaibl's text is prefaced by a lengthy discussion of the metaphysical aspects of the existence of the soul, the afterlife, eternal damnation, apparitions of God, Christ, the Mother of God, angels and spirits within a context of Catholicism, and of Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Hindu, Chinese, German and Jewish mythologies. This discussion is followed by the narration of the other-worldly events that occurred between 1641 and 1642 to Regina Fischer. The narrative itself has been collated by

Gaibl from a series of witness statements, collected and published in 1643 under the auspices of the then Bishop and Probus of Pressburg, Michel Kopchani. The *NRA* text itself contains a list of these witnesses, thirty-two in total, the last of which is Regina Fischer, titled *jungfrau*, ‘virgin’, or ‘single woman’.

Gaibl’s text is a complex and challenging one for the postmodern consciousness. Taken from an account from the pre-Enlightenment era, the *NRA* is structured to fit a consciousness of late nineteenth-century scientism, which had its own origins in the Enlightenment (1687-1776)⁴⁸ away from ‘superstition and dark majick.’ I contend that Gaibl’s text is structured to fit a certain political agenda as well, although this may contradict my own argument that *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* also works on this level of political discussion. The *NRA* pays a certain homage to the explanation of the mystical events through rational thought, which renders Gaibl’s narrative somewhat obscure in its intent, since ‘mystical’ and ‘rational’ are a binary pairing which are supposed to be diametrically opposite to each other and thus unable to intersect at any point. Narrated in the third person, the *NRA* describes the story of the ghost, the maiden and the wondrous events surrounding them in many odd twists and turns as the writer attempts to include all the ‘facts’ taken from the

⁴⁷ Gaibl writes: ‘Es würde zu lange dauern, alles einzelne zu erwähnen, es ist auch nicht notwendig, da es vollkommen mit dem übereinstimmt, was wir über ähnliches, durch Gottes Anordnung verfüget, bei andern Schrifstelleren lesen’ (Gaibl, 1910: 127-128).

⁴⁸ The Enlightenment era dates from 1687 to 1776, according to the historian Preserved Smith (1966). Redwood (1976) posits the Enlightenment era to have dated from 1660 to 1750. Other academics, such as Gascoine (1998) and Porter and Teich (1981) are more fluid with their dating of the Enlightenment era, stating that many of the philosophies that define this era were actually debated in a broad pan-European context since around 1600. Gascoine states: ‘Schmitt’s work on the Italian universities of the sixteenth century has shown that the scholastic natural philosophy which was taught in the universities was more diverse and more amenable to adaptation and development than the traditional picture of a hidebound and monolithic orthodoxy will allow’ (Gascoine, 1998: 391). Teich also considers the demarcation of the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment eras as ‘“historically demarcated sequences” of the long-drawn-out transition from feudalism to capitalism’ (Porter and Teich, 1981: 216). Thus it is possible that in 1643, the character of the scribe-priest in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* may be educated in philosophical concepts that are traditionally ascribed to the Enlightenment era despite his own historical location in the Reformation era. However, for the technical accuracy of this exegesis, I will refer to this era as the Reformation rather than the Enlightenment.

original text of 1643 into a rational and non-emotional description.⁴⁹ This makes the *NRA* difficult to read, as events are accompanied by descriptions of as many ‘facts’ as possible, by interjections of events occurring simultaneously, by flashbacks and addenda that take the reader’s attention away from a coherent narrative thread. My first concern relates to the *NRA* text as a narrative. The *NRA* is not intended to be a fictional narrative, and even as a piece of non-fiction or rudimentary reportage, it is difficult to imagine how a reader can grasp the coherent narrative in the text.

My second concern with the *NRA* text relates to the notion of an ‘authentic voice’ that can be identified underneath the changes of time and historical perspectives. By the term ‘authentic voice’, I refer to the voice of a character that expresses the unique reactions of an individual, which are both complex and unexpected. The notion of social construction carries a great deal of weight in my perceptions of the characters, and certainly is a filter that covers a great deal of the research surrounding the case of Regina Fischer. One of the problems presented to me throughout the research and writing of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* was the uncovering of a voice which relied on its own reactions to events, rather than the constructs of socially acceptable reactions of its historical period. It is this voice that I prefer to term the ‘authentic voice’, since it operates in a private and personal arena that is both unique and apart from the patriarchal Symbolic Order that shapes the narrative of history. It is, also, within the project of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, the creative task to unearth this voice from the various historical narratives about Regina Fischer.

⁴⁹ Gaibl includes a type of disclaimer of objectivity in the preface to his work: ‘Ich erkläre hiemit, dass ich der hier zu beschreibenden wunderlichen Tat nur menschlichen Glauben geschenkt haben will, und zwar inwiefern die angeführten Beweise es verdienen und dass ich mich in allem der diesbezüglichen Bulle Papst Urban des VIII vom 13 Mai 1625 unterwerfe’ [‘I hereby declare that in describing this wonderful act, I wish to give only humanistic beliefs, and indeed to what extent the driving proof is earned, and that I myself submit to the Papal Bull of Urban of the 13th of May, 1625, of all concerns to this subject.’] (Gaihl, *NRA* Preface: no pp).

Given the political agenda of Gaibl's account, I find very little within the text that indicates any allusion to the seventeenth century itself, despite Gaibl's avowal of his objectivity; even the mention of the Lutheran Church's accusation of witchcraft against Regina is only a passing comment and hardly scrutinized as a piece of historical 'colour' or 'flavour'. Gaibl's account renders the voices of almost all of the characters as sterile, forced, and stereotyped.⁵⁰ My particular concern relates to the actual, 'authentic', voice of the haunted laundry-maid, Regina Fischer. Gaibl's first description of Regina states:

At twenty years, [she] possesses in her position and age a rare understanding, a knowledge of spirit and flesh which not only Catholics but also non-Catholics acknowledge. Her piety was well known amongst the inhabitants and her special grip of thought was that action testified events, so the following history was written - her belief in events was so strong that this description was recorded.⁵¹

This introduction to the main protagonist created another 'misfit to signal the way' in my reading of the *NRA* text, that of a certain watchfulness for this 'rare

⁵⁰ For instance, the first description of Johannes Klement Zwespenbauer, the ghost, states: 'Er war ein ehrbarer Bürger und führte überjene, die zum Schlosse (welches ausser der Stadt war) gehörten, das Richteramt und wohnte auch in dieser Vorstadt. Durch beiläufig vierunfünzig Jahre war er ein Anhänger der lutherischen Religion und führte kein tadelloses Leben. Siebn Jahre vor seinem christlich überstandenen Tode was er katholisch geworden und änderte dermassen mit der Religion auch seine Sitten, dass man ihn der Kirche weinen und seufsen sah; führte ein des Christen würdiges Leben und starb in einem Alter von über sechzig Jahren. Dieser ist es, von dem jetzt die Rede ist, das hat er selbst bei seiner Erscheinung ausgesprochen' ['He was an honourable middle-class citizen and led those who belonged to the castle (which was just outside the city), and lived in the suburbs of the city. During his fifty-four years he was a follower of the Lutheran religion, and led a blameless life. Seven years before his death he converted to Catholicism and altered also his wisdom in the change of religion, and mourners sighed and cried in the church (at his funeral). He led an honourable Christian life and died at an age of over sixty-four years. This of which is spoken, did he himself say during his apparition.'] (Gaihl, 1910: 91-92). Later on in the narrative we learn that Klement was an accessory to murder and theft, which somewhat contradicts Gaibl's posthumous description.

⁵¹ Gaibl writes: 'Sie ist jetzt im zwanzigsten Jahre und besitzt eined in ihrem Stande und Alter seltenend Verstand, eine Bescheidenheit des Geistes und des Körpers, was nicht nur den Katholiken, sondern auch von den Nichtkatholiken anerkannte wurde' (Gaihl, 1910: 93).

understanding' of a twenty-year-old servant girl who had been subjected to a traumatic supernatural experience. However, the *NRA* text contains no evidence of any statements or 'voice' appearing as a direct report from Regina herself. During my research in Bratislava the original witness statements taken in 1642/43 were unavailable because of the renovation of the interior of the St Martins' Cathedral, the statements being irretrievable due to an extensive rearrangement of archival material. However disappointed I was to discover this (despite several attempts to view the statements and assurances that this was possible), it seemed to me that Regina's silence and unavailability was still being maintained by the prevailing 'powers that be'.

Further research revealed two other seventeenth century texts that described the Pozsony 'apparition', both published in 1643; one, a Catholic document by the Slovak canon Thomas Bielavius was titled *Schrift über den Wunderglauben, der in Zusammenhang mit der Seele eines Verstorbenen in Preßburg entstanden ist*,⁵² the other by a Protestant cleric Zacharius Láni, entitled *Pseudospiritus Posniensis oder urteil über den falschen Preßburger Geist*,⁵³ Searches through Slovakia, Austria and Hungary for these documents in either the original or facsimile proved futile. However mention of the texts were found in several second-hand sources, all of which made much of the Catholic and Lutheran history, the superstition of the legend, the art/craft work of the Pietá associated with the haunting, and the linguistic history of the two earlier texts. Two of these sources - Zary et al, *Der Martinsdom in Bratislava* (1990),⁵⁴ and Horváth et al, *Dejiny Bratislava* (1978)⁵⁵ - make no mention at all of Regina Fischer in their discussion of the case. My intimations of Regina's

⁵² In Slovak, *Spis predivné very, ktorá se stala s jednou duši v Prešpurku* ['A Document Concerning the Miraculous Belief that in Connection with the Soul of a Deceased Pressburger is a Result'].

⁵³ In Slovak, *Pseudospiritus Posniensis aneb Soud o falešním duchu Prešpoském* ['The Pseudospirit of Pozsony, or the Opinion about the False Pressburg Ghost'].

'voice' buried underneath a mountain of historical 'fact' began to deepen. A certain critical paranoia became instrumental in my decision not to rely on intellectualized versions of the narrative to recover the voice of a haunted woman, a decision which then left the writing of Regina Fischer to a completely different set of creative impulses than that of historically and rationally informed narrative. I was challenged to 'feel' my way through this character, as I had no clues to her whatsoever, and this challenge was defined by my own twenty-first century sensibilities as a feminist and a writer. Since no space was made for Regina Fischer in the official historical accounts of her story, the need became clear to create a space for her voice. And since part of my own consciousness was angered by the lack of effort to acknowledge the trauma that Regina Fischer had undergone, the space that Regina was to occupy became a site of resistance to the very structure that attempted to both erase her and rewrite her. When Regina was mentioned at all, she was described as either the traditional saintly side of the virgin/whore dichotomy, or as an 'Other',⁵⁶ an oddity, a young lower-class woman whose experiences left her with a knowledge that was beyond the accepted boundaries of young womanhood and transcended the political divisions of both Catholic and Lutheran dogmas. It was at this point that I found it necessary to 'write back' to history from my own perceptions and create a site of resistance for Regina which could not be touched by any outside construct or influence. I refer to this site as the unique 'interior journey' of Regina's own inner voice, which throughout *A*

⁵⁴ *The St Martin's Cathedral in Bratislava.*

⁵⁵ *History of Bratislava.*

⁵⁶ Schor describes the 'Other' as 'the means by which patriarchy fixed women in the place of the absolute Other, projecting onto women a femininity constituted of the refuse of masculine transcendence. Otherness . . . is utter negativity; it is the realm of . . . the abject' (Schor, 1994: 65).

Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh informs both the Ghostwriter and the reader of the experiences that only Regina can express from within herself and only *to* herself.⁵⁷

The reports of Regina's story belong to a construct that is placed 'without' Regina, surrounding her with layers of narrative which are shaped by outside influences. In contrast, the interior journey sections in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* are written as Regina's own responses to the events, responses that come from a part of the character's psyche that is not intruded upon by outside influences; this is the 'within' part of Regina, one which acts as a site of resistance to whatever influences seek to rewrite her in terms of the patriarchal Symbolic Order. The notion of the interior journey therefore contends that within each individual there is a space that is not touched and shaped by the influence of the external Symbolic Order, and in this case, that there is a site for a female voice that is not part of the patriarchal binary duality that creates an either/or dichotomy for the role of the 'feminine'. Thus, in terms of the project of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, the interior journey of Regina is written to create the resistive site where the voice of the character is not overlaid with the expectations of the existing Symbolic Order.

Regina Talks: Writing Sites of Resistance

Due to Regina's childhood experience with a village cunning-woman, as well as her psychic connection with her sister and the resulting psychic 'openness' which allows Klement Zwespenbauer to contact her, there is already in place - prior to Regina's journey to Pressburg - a certain amount of social difference from, and resistance to, the patriarchal Symbolic Order which she encounters in that city. It has been well

⁵⁷ In Chapter Three I discuss further how this site of resistance acts upon the Ghostwriter destabilising his own patriarchal and psychological sensibilities and allowing him to make space to hear what

documented that pagan religious activity existed in tandem with Christian religious activity until well into the Enlightenment era.⁵⁸ Some historians speculate that shamanistic activity remained operative even in the Soviet era.⁵⁹ Certainly modern and postmodern anthropological documentation has described shamanic activity in great detail,⁶⁰ and much contemporary popular paganism relies heavily on these descriptions for its spiritual undertakings. The writing of Regina's 'authentic voice' relies on shamanistic and pagan experiences of the numinous to find the resistive space under, inbetween, and beside the Symbolic Order that is attempting to shape her story and her self to fit its own agenda. As such, the writing of Regina's 'authentic' voice needed to encompass various literary techniques which could separate this voice from a more traditional writing style. I discuss the technique of *écriture féminine* in relation to *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* in detail in Chapter Three. However, I will briefly mention here some of the techniques of this writing style employed to 'write back' to a female history that includes a consciousness of female shamanistic/witchcraft numinous activity.

The novel employs three different voices which enact the interweaving of the two main protagonists, Regina and the Ghostwriter, and their reaction with each other: the voices of Regina, the Ghostwriter and of the third person narrative.⁶¹ The third person narrative depicts the differences between the two main protagonists, the

Regina needs to say without his own filtering and construction of her story.

⁵⁸ See for instance Jones and Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe* (1995); Shlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess* (1998); Ehrenreich, and English, (1973) *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*; Profantová and Profant, *Encyklopedie slovanských bohů a mýtu* (2000), and Klaniczay, *The Uses of Supernatural Power: The Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early-Modern Europe* (1990).

⁵⁹ See for instance Bonewits, (2001) 'Indo-European Paleopaganism and its Clergy 1.6'. Certainly one of my encounters during my field research saw me introduced to a Slovak shaman who engaged me in a conversation about globalization.

⁶⁰ See for instance Castenada, *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1990); Castenadana, *A Separate Reality* (1900); Drury, *Shamanism* (2000); Hume, *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia* (1997), and Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe, 1100- 1700* (1972).

interplay of these differences, and their cumulative effects on both characters. The third person narrative effectively demonstrates the notion of 'without' and how in this schema the persona of the character differs to the 'within'. The Ghostwriter's personal journal demonstrates how the logical rationality by which he is educated becomes destabilized by Regina Fischer, and how this construct may ultimately be shifted away from the Symbolic Order into which it is placed. Regina's voice, however, utilizes several differing techniques which consciously attempt to be written and read on more than one level. Stream-of-consciousness poetics are employed to render a more random, spontaneous style for Regina's 'authentic voice', which also utilizes a technique of both writing and creating a resistive space that Hélène Cixous might term 'writing from the body'.⁶² In *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, however, Regina's 'authentic voice' comes from her psyche as well as her body, which engages in numinous immanence, blending not only with her inner voice, but also with the voices of other characters and other spaces. For instance, the section entitled 'Regina's soul journeys' (Thomas b: 165) is a first-person description of an out-of-body meditation that Regina undertakes during one of her spells of 'illness'.⁶³ Gaibl describes in 'Extase der Regina' (Gaihl, 1910: 127) an episode of ecstatic experience in which Regina meets the Holy Mother of God and is shown visions of Purgatory, Hell and Heaven. In Gaibl's schema, Regina is written as a fragile female so deeply

⁶¹ In the novel *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, 'voice' in the sense of the third person narrative can be 'embodied' when it is the voice of a character, or 'disembodied' when it is the voice of the so-called objective voice of exposition.

⁶² Cixous elucidates the process as follows: 'To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal . . . A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter' (Cixous, 1976: 880).

⁶³ Gaibl describes how Regina was prone to illness during the manifestations of Klement Zwespenbauer, particularly how she would remain ill for weeks at a time: 'Kurze Zeit darauf stellte er sich ihr in der Kellertüre entgegen und stürzte auf sie los, als wollte Grade erschütterte, dass sie durch drei Wochen das Bett hüten musste' ['A short time afterwards, he put himself contrary to the cellar door and she fell over [him] when he wanted to embrace her. Regina was shaken to such a high degree that she had to stay in bed for three weeks'] (Gaihl, 1910: 97).

traumatized by the haunting that she must become 'ill' to recover. As a result of this treatment, Regina then is rewarded by a vision of Deity which perhaps can only be claimed by those of a saintly bent in Gaibl's Christian Symbolic Order. This ordering of the female as both weak and saintly signalled for me a space where resistance could be created, by not only creating for Regina a more complex spiritual background, but also by literally making a space in the text where these experiences are not confined to the text but allowed page space in the form of footnotes. It is in this literal page space out of the text that much expression of the numinous characters occurs; the margins create a frame which I liken to the 'between-worlds' space in which spiritual activity is said to occur. Thus Regina's inner life is blended with the Holy Mother character throughout the novel to indicate that there is space outside the tangible world (of the characters) and the defined page, where a resistive dialogue can occur that is not reliant on the Symbolic Order to define its values.

Regina's 'authentic voice' also intrudes upon her dialogue with other people. Much of the novel's second section is given over to Regina's voice. In this section, Regina's inner dialogue runs as a counterpoint to the dialogue which she is having with her exterior world; again, this inner dialogue forms a resistive space for Regina's voice in which she can question her experiences. In one particular scene, Regina's voice mingles with the voices of the three cunning-women who form an unseen shamanic support for her (Thomas b: 272). This mingling of voices forms a site where personality is no longer defined, an immanent function in the psychic space outside the tangible world. In the schema of Regina's religious confusion, this is a site in which she is no longer being shaped by patriarchal values but can function on a level that is not only her own, but part of her belief system in the Immanent Goddess that is hidden beneath the overlays that have been placed upon her by the various

historiographies of her case. I am aware that my own consciousness is toying with history here, but the creative 'writing back' of such a narrative creates a space in which the binary dualisms can be transcended and new forms of dialogue with the past can be explored.

The 'Other', History and 'Herstory': Ecstatic Voices That Sing Through the Official Versions

In writing *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, I consciously attempted to draw away from the binary polarities that make up much of what Naomi Schor identifies with Western metaphysics.⁶⁴ I deliberately attempted to destabilize not only the characters that are caught up in the binary polarities of their existence, but also to destabilize the spaces of text and language, and so create sites of resistance to patriarchal values and new sites for expression of female subjectivity. Rita Felski has identified the basis of much feminist discourse and critique as 'negative' definitions of the feminine within the western Symbolic Order. According to Felski,

A definition of the 'feminine' as perpetual negativity and dissidence simplifies the complex relationship between feminism and existing ideological and cultural traditions and has the consequence of leading feminist theorists to dismiss all forms of discursive argumentation as inherently patriarchal without considering the fact that any form of critique, if it is not to lapse into arbitrary subjectivism, depends upon intersubjective

⁶⁴ Schor states: 'Essentialism . . . is complicitous with Western metaphysics. To subscribe to the binary opposition man/woman is to remain a prisoner of the metaphysical, with its illusions of presence, Being, stable meanings, and identities. The essentialist in this scheme of things is not . . . one who refuses to accept the phallogocentric ordering of the symbolic, rather one who fails to acknowledge the

norms and values. Negativity plays an important role within feminism in the critique of patriarchal ideology and institutions, but it cannot in itself provide the defining moment of a feminist aesthetics or politics (Felski, 1989: 46).

Part of the project of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* is to question this negative aspect of feminist critique and to write through the case of Regina Fischer a resistance to this notion, that - collectively - the 'female' and the 'feminine' are not necessarily a site of negative expression, but instead can be posited as a complex, positive, resistive and unique place where the 'female' and the 'feminine' has a valid expression of its own, without the need to hold it up to its binary pair, the 'male' and the 'masculine.' I have already discussed in the previous chapter the stalemate that binary opposition has produced in the continuing discourse of female/male and feminism/patriarchy, and the relation of Immanent Goddess to alleviating some of the assumptions of binary duality. I now turn to a discussion of the theory of the 'Other' and its relationship to the function of creating a site of feminist resistance in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*. In this section I also make use of a history-specific case of female ecstatic prophecy to illustrate the existence, in the past, of deep female numinous experience outside the boundaries of patriarchal relations. In this sense, Regina is not simply a construct of my own twenty-first century feminist and creative consciousness, but also has verifiable historical antecedents.

The subsuming metanarrative of the patriarchal Symbolic Order consistently and persistently posits 'woman' as the 'Other' within that Order. Whether 'woman' draws strength or weakness from this position is not the underlying issue at hand, but rather that 'she' is a constant alien in a world which constructs itself in a specific way

that continues to reject 'her'. This alien state becomes the natural position of the 'Other,' who remains locked in a stasis, and possibly a stalemate, with a Symbolic Order which is unwilling to change. Many theories have emerged exploring what it means to be the alien 'woman' or 'Other'.⁶⁵ Many fictional works have been created that celebrate the alien status of 'womanhood' as a liberating and joyous response to realizing self-identity within a system that rejects this identity.⁶⁶ And yet the notion of operating 'within a system' keeps the feminist project anchored in the stalemate of the binary opposition of feminism/patriarchy.

It is undeniable that feminist theory, discourse, debate and action has achieved a great deal of change for women within the framework of a western patriarchal world. However it is through the medium of the outer world, the 'outer consciousness' that these changes have occurred. If 'woman' continues to posit 'her' self and 'her' liberation in terms of the 'patriarchy', then the future changes will be made in response to the social world outside her self. 'She' will continue to engage in a battle with the 'patriarchy' outside her self. 'She' will continue to act and react according to the binary opposition that 'she' has identified and analysed. In the writing of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, this function *could* have occurred, this process of reacting to the stalemate of the feminism/patriarchy duality, if the fictional focus had concentrated solely on the exploration of the power differential between Regina and the three male protagonists: Klement Zwespenbauer, the Ghostwriter and the Graf. Instead, a site of resistance emerged that was located in a space that was removed not only from the binary tensions of 'Other'/Symbolic Order, woman/man,

multiple differences play' (Schor, 1993: 65-66).

⁶⁵ Theories that explore the 'alien' or 'Other' status of woman include the different modes of feminism, such as radical feminism, liberal feminism, postmodern feminism, postfeminism, ecofeminism and so on (Weedon, 1999: pp26-50, pp51-76, pp131-151).

⁶⁶ See for instance Allende, *The House of the Spirits* (1985); Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (1983); Cixous, *The Book of Promethea* (1991b); Day, *Lambs of God* (1997); Diamant, *The Red Tent* (1998);

woman/Church, but also from the notion of the binary oppositional power exchange altogether. In this regard I suggest that the pairing of feminism/patriarchy itself has become an outmoded paradigm, whose assumptions are grounded in essentialist notions of 'woman' as undifferentiated, negative 'Other', and therefore in a generalisation which cannot account for the specificity of women's experience, or the positive potential of women's 'inner consciousness'.

Rather than relying on the essentializing binarism of feminism/patriarchy, *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* explores different strategies in the search for self-identity and autonomy within a world which is both alienating and tyrannical. The strategy utilized in the fictional portrayal of Regina Fischer's narrative is that of the interior journey, an exchange that does not rely on the outer consciousness of the 'world acting upon the victim' who then finds her own strength within the framework of that world, but rather one where the individual embarks on an unseen journey of the self which is not reliant on the framework of the 'official' world as a site of reaction, rebellion and revolutionary change.

The exploration of resistance to exterior pressures, the literary mapping of the place of the 'Other', has created a well-worn terrain with well-known representational features. One of these is the stereotype. According to bell hooks:

Stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are not to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretence. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an

invention, a pretence that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken - are not allowed (hooks, 1993: 38).

Throughout the writing of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* the distance that hooks describes was problematized by counterposing history and its indirect, stereotypical representations with the interior journey. It would have been a quite simple task to locate Regina and the Ghostwriter, Regina and the ghost, in a power duality of man/woman and move the plot along to a resolution of either happy ending/sad ending, closure of action/non-closure of action. Regina could have been a character to react only to her exterior world and hence be too easily moved by her immediate, material surroundings; in a similar way, she all too easily could have been mapped by my own reaction to the historical representation - or non-representation - of her by the various male historians who have reported her case. This would have created a distance between myself and Regina, between the twenty-first century and the seventeenth, between experiential existence and reported history, and thus might have summoned forth hooks's evocative 'inventions,' the pretences 'that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken - are not allowed'. The notion that 'history' is a distance that by necessity separates my contemporary time with Regina's time became a problem. The narrative journeys which are presented by Gaibl, Bielavius, Láni, Horvath et al, and Zary et al are filtered down through several layers of historical and political representation which restrict the notion of 'real knowing'. To have engaged in the writing of Regina's story as a part of the binary duality of the feminist/patriarchal discourse would have not created a new way of 'knowing', not have explored the possibilities of change to the 'perpetual negative' that can experiment, explore and expand what it means to be 'female'. My need as a writer was to conflate notions of 'knowing' and 'history' outside of the

western binary duality, to create a space where Regina and the Ghostwriter could pursue full expression of the complexities of their situations. A site of resistance to the notions of 'time', 'feminism', 'history', 'patriarchy' needed to be located. In *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, this site is the interior journey, the immaterial space where exterior action is not the sole arbiter of the mental, emotional and spiritual process.

The dialogue between the past and the present in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* deals with that arena which the fallacious transcription of History does not acknowledge or understand (the inner lived experience), preferring to create historico-political idealisations, or narratives. In terms of binary dualities, History could be described as a pairing of public/private and official/unofficial spheres, generally allocating the division between the masculine world of commerce/religion/politics/cultural production, and the feminine world of the home. When approaching a critique of the private and feminine world through the feminist/patriarchy mode of knowing, the feminine and private world is placed in context with the masculine and public world, and produced as a counterpart rather than a site of resistance. A historical evaluation of the period of Regina Fischer's haunting between 1641 and 1642 reveals a social instance that is not mentioned in any of the above-mentioned historical reproductions of the case: female involvement with Divinity which occurred not only within public Christian traditions, but also within folk or non-Christian traditions that were widely accepted at the time, and perhaps more in the private, unofficial spheres of life.

Within the folk, or non-Christian tradition, Gabor Klaniczay has traced the rise and fall of female Divine connection through Bahktinian notions of 'popular culture' that separate the private/unofficial sphere from the public/official and elite spheres

that have been transmitted through historical accounts. In the pre-medieval and medieval eras, the function of spiritually-inclined women was harnessed by a 'cult of female saints' who were alleged to engage in practices that could be related to 'popular' shamanistic practices (Klaniczay 1990: 109-110);⁶⁷ these later trickled down in Central Europe of the seventeenth century to divisions in agrarian communities between shamanistic healers and witches.⁶⁸ Klaniczay notes that '[w]itch-hunting then proceeded fairly actively until stopped from above by the enlightened legislation of Maria Theresa between 1758 and 1766' (Klaniczay, 1990: 161). In Central Europe, then, the consciousness of female divinity or at least female interaction with forces outside the jurisdiction of Christian definitions of the Divine, certainly was in place.

Within the public Christian tradition, Phyllis Mack has documented a number of unapologetic ecstatic visionary women in England who claimed the freedom to speak in God's name and who accrued considerable power in public religious and political arenas (Mack, 1992: 87-124; 127-164; 236-261). Mack describes the function of language in ecstatic prophecy as 'channeled' from God and therefore supposedly freer than the language of the female in the then contemporary public space.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Mack notes that 'gender roles' were more fluid in the seventeenth century than modern and postmodern assumptions have discussed⁷⁰ and that the

⁶⁷ Klaniczay states: 'Witchcraft is also related in many ways to the cult of saints. As for the morphological structure describing the operation of (beneficent or maleficent) magical power, the cult of saints (with the belief in miracle-working relics) and the popular notions of witchcraft represent two analogous (though opposed) poles of the wider universe of popular religious conceptions about magic' (Klaniczay, 1990: 4).

⁶⁸ Klaniczay notes that despite an overall integration of differing practices into 'the system of witch-beliefs', a difference between witch-doctors and shamanistic sorcerers existed that differentiated not only magical practice but community structure as well (Klaniczay, 1990: 150).

⁶⁹ Here, according to NH Keeble, '[a]ny encroachment by a woman upon the masculine spheres of scholarship and politics and any publication of female opinions had consequently to make its way apologetically, disclaiming self-assertiveness and any intention to "equalize women to men"' (Keeble, 1994: ix).

⁷⁰ Mack notes that '[for seventeenth-century] men and women, a phrase like "gender roles" would have meant precisely what it said; the adoption of the social roles or conventions of masculine or feminine behaviour. And the existence of those fixed conventions, whose character was trumpeted from the pulpits, thrones, and parliaments, not only gave a kind of theatricality to the actions of men and

'internalization of social roles as inherent personality traits' (Mack, 1992: 6) is a product of modern rather than pre-modern social mores. Given that Gaibl's account of Regina Fischer's haunting is an early twentieth century representation and therefore perhaps inhibited by the 'internalization of social roles' of the nineteenth century, the problem of the construct that has been made of Regina Fischer can be circumvented through what I have termed the interior journey. Although it is not mentioned in any of the accounts of Regina Fischer's haunting I have researched, I contend that the notion of female participation in the Divine was in place in seventeenth-century Pressburg and that this aspect of the case may well have been silenced by the various male historians presenting their own cases, and thus creating a fallacy of history by their silence. In this sense Regina's ecstasy in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* can be conflated with her visions, her silences, her insistence on expressing her own story in her own words, and these functions collectively conflated with the ecstatic prophecies of the visionary Quaker women. Moreover, Regina's ecstasy can be seen as a conflation of Christian and 'Satanic' (or pagan) elements. In this regard, Phyllis Mack has noted the 'feeling' - as opposed to 'thinking' - function of knowledge in the seventeenth century.⁷¹ According to Mack, female ecstatic prophets brought down God's voice through their bodies, whereas witches carried out the same function tainted by 'Satanic influences.' Certainly this was the conception of the public, official Christian world of a more private, unofficial (or pagan) world which was still

women; it implied that roles could be switched . . . [these roles] were invested with a meaning very different from similar practices in our own culture' (Mack, 1992: 6-7). Michel Foucault makes a similar point throughout *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (Foucault, 1984).

⁷¹ Mack states: 'Far from posing a clear dichotomy between mind and body, seventeenth century men and women *felt* certain kinds of knowledge. They described their own spirituality not as an ethereal, disembodied state but as a polymorphous, subterranean energy, more akin to the power Freud ascribed to sex than it was to the diluted piety of an eighteenth century pillar of the church. Thus, the metaphor of woman as vessel conveyed a literal as well as literary meaning, for the woman's body was understood to be a potentially explosive device, the carrier of an inflammable spiritual essence. But whereas the visionary's protean energy had been transmuted by the real presence of God into spiritual ecstasy, the energy of the witch has been transmuted by Satanic influence into pure bestial malice or lust' (Mack, 1992: 23).

widely accepted as a social norm in the seventeenth century, and certainly in Pressburg/Poszony at the time of the events of Regina's haunting.

In this sense, between the seventeenth-century consciousness of the Divine (expressed by both the Quaker visionary women and by Regina Fischer) and my own twenty-first century consciousness, a space of resistance to the patriarchal construct of female/male can be constructed and a dialogue between past and present can be created to explore the way in which it is possible to disengage from the Symbolic Order of patriarchy and find a self which does not need to be confined by patriarchy's social constructs. In this way *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* explores a site of resistance which destabilises the notion of history as either historical assumption or fallacious historical transmission.

Chapter Three

Beyond Binary Polarities: Sites of 'Feminine' Language and Resistance Post *Écriture Féminine*

But since everything has been called light and night, and they have been assigned according to their properties to various things, everything is full at once of light and of obscure night, full of both equally, since neither has any share of nothingness (Fragment Nine, Parmenides in Austin, 1986: 167-8).

Once more you'll say this all this smacks of 'idealism,' or what's worse, you'll splutter that I'm a 'mystic' (Cixous, 1976: 891).

Between the interior journey and *écriture féminine*⁷² there is a bridge which must be crossed when analyzing *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*. The previous chapter has demonstrated how the interior journey of the characters in the novel becomes an important site of resistance when presenting the narrative of Regina Fischer from a feminist-based perspective. In this chapter I demonstrate how the interior journey can combine with postmodern theories of *écriture féminine*, to become a point of departure for the intimate exposition of the characters whose stories are woven alongside Regina's. The interior journey can almost be likened to the function of *écriture féminine*, in that the interior journey uses traditional notions and theories of a 'female language' to explore the interior landscape of the female psyche and body - or the many disparate parts that make up 'woman.' In this chapter I demonstrate how *A*

⁷² Rosemarie Putnam Tong defines *écriture féminine*, as 'a feminine writing that consciously objects to masculine, binary oppositions which 'segment reality by coupling concepts and terms in pairs of polar opposites, one of which is always privileged over the other' (Tong, 1998: 199). Garner et al define *écriture féminine* as follows: 'The insertion of the question of language introduces the notion of a form

Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh not only uses notions and practices of *écriture féminine*, but also challenges and departs from some of its ideas which have been criticized as essentialist in relation to broader notions of female-based language, linguistics, aesthetics and creative style. Thus I show how *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* becomes a site of resistance to binary oppositional and patriarchal constraints that can be placed upon narrative exposition and historical account. I also demonstrate how a character's interior journey can combine with aspects of *écriture féminine* and more traditional writing techniques to produce a reaction of styles which further complicates the interplay between characterization, narrative and theory. This creates an ephemeral zone of connection between the characters, their interior journeys, and the reader/writer.

***Écriture féminine*, essentialism and difference theory**

In *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, the technique of *écriture féminine* - or as Hélène Cixous posits 'writing from the body'⁷³ - could be said to inscribe Regina's interior journey, or the interior journey of her body. However, the narrative device of the interior journey and the technique of *écriture féminine* in fact serve differing functions throughout my novel. The original intention of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* (as set out in the proposal for the project) included the writing of a text entirely in the style of *écriture féminine*. Writing in such a style has variously been described as

of expressivity outside the dominant discourse [narrative with 'official patriarchal imprimatur'], a discourse closer to the body, an *écriture féminine*' (Garner et al, 1985: 22).

⁷³ In 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Cixous elucidates this notion as follows: 'To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal' (Cixous, 1976: 880).

avant-garde (Kristeva),⁷⁴ stylistically and politically experimental (Murphy),⁷⁵ and practised as stream-of-consciousness writing (Woolf).⁷⁶ The original research question posed for this project was: how can a narrative incorporating female poetics be generated from a patriarchal metanarrative? My initial concern was to create a text that was written entirely using the *écriture féminine* method or style, to give voice to what I considered the entirely oppressed, 'voiceless' female protagonist. Thus, I reasoned, '[i]t is my primary aim and concern that the novelised reinterpretation of the *NRA* text actively engages with the idea and the creation of a "new poetics", a "reinvented language", which fictively theorizes and practices the *écriture féminine*. The sustained use of such a technique can be seen in Hélène Cixous's creative work *The Book of Promethea* (1991b). This text is a free-flowing meditation upon the complex love relationship between two women, written with a mythic theme and unstructured form utilizing the *écriture féminine* technique that most of Cixous' fictional works demonstrate.⁷⁷ Betsy Wing has this to say about Cixous' writing in general:

A close reader of [Cixous'] texts can sense, accompanying the feminine libidinal effects that seem so effortless in her writing, her strong, intelligent consciousness of what she is doing. This consciousness and this doing - this subject - however, are removed from the notion of agency common to English and American philosophical tradition. Rather than 'agency', the

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Grosz notes that '[f]or Kristeva, avant-garde texts . . . liberate excessive, semiotic processes within the symbolic production and within existing social unities . . . [The avant-garde] captures and expresses libidinal, rhythmical impulses which threaten the symbolic with what it must repress' (Grosz, 1989: 55).

⁷⁵ Murphy describes this literary style as having these 'key features, in particular the revolutionary, counter-discursive and anti-intellectual functions' (Murphy, 1998: 3).

⁷⁶ See specifically Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1992).

⁷⁷ See for example Cixous (1979), *Ananké*; Cixous (1980), *Illa*; Cixous (1994) *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Camobodia*; and Cixous (1991b), *The Book of Promethea*.

basis of the subject is a place, the active moment, at which these libidinal effects and a consciousness of them are produced - not unlike those places in the text where she will use a noun to function as a verb. Cixous calls this practice 'writing from the body'. Occasionally, judged in a reiteration of our Anglo-American tradition with its own system of clichés, one will hear it called 'sentimental' or 'self-indulgent'. These clichés define feminine perceptions, states, and activities dismissively, in language that is supposed to be neutral. Neither for Cixous nor for her critics, however, can there be such a thing as neutral language - there is only language carrying and enforcing our deepest, earliest constructions and our unconscious participations in ideology (Wing, in Cixous, 1991b: vii-viii).

Such a definition of text, of narrative, and of creative expression sets up a heady challenge for the feminist writer - such as myself - concerned with the analysis of language and female expression outside the arena of a patriarchal structure. Moreover, the creative process, much like the notion of *écriture féminine*, does not lend itself well to definition, structure and the stricture of theoretical intentions. While researching the techniques of this style of writing, it became clear to me that a text written entirely 'from the body' of Regina Fischer would undoubtedly fail to address certain 'moments of transgression' identified in my reading of the *NRA* text.⁷⁸ Given that I was reading the *NRA* text with a feminist critical faculty, I noticed many of these textual and narrative moments, or misfits, which both piqued my interest and provided the foundations for not only narrative exploration but characterization as well. To write a novel based on the technique of - for instance, Cixous's *The Book of Promethea* - in one voice, using one style and expressing one viewpoint in the story

seemed to me to point toward a work that would omit much of the detail hidden within the confines of the *NRA* text, which had the potential to create a rich, complex and character-driven novel. During my reading of texts employing a 'strict' style of *écriture féminine*⁷⁹ it occurred to me that adherence to this style might severely limit the potential of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* in terms of narrative and character, as well as accessibility for the reader.

The theorization of this novel has presented me with several ends of inquiry which have seemed to be as brick walls to my own development of theoretical thinking. In my most impassioned moments, I like to think of my engagement with language and feminism in Cixousian terms; the 'utopian moment' of a 'purely "feminine" writing' that Rita Felski describes⁸⁰ presents me with a challenge on creative, literary *and* feminist levels. However the notion that we, as women, as 'Others' in this symbolic system and yet so imbued with this order, cannot escape the impression of the patriarchal order upon us leads me to identify with Felski's 'anxiety of influence' as well.⁸¹ On the practical level, the project also presented me with another key problem: whether to sustain a narrative that incorporated the 'linear' form of storytelling (and thus the 'patriarchal' narrative), or to create a text more in line with my own aesthetic concepts of *écriture féminine* (and thus produce a non-linear,

⁷⁸ As previously noted, Spivak's notion of 'reading against the grain' is a technique of reading which occurs when there are moments of transgression, or misfits within a text that signal the reader to read a text in a way apart from the text's philosophical and political parameters.

⁷⁹ See for instance Budapest (1998), *Summoning the Fates*; Cixous (1991b), *The Book of Promethea*; Divakaruni (1997), *The Mistress of Spices*; Kinstler (1989), *The Moon Under Her Feet*; and Worth (1999), *A Crone's Book of Magic Words*.

⁸⁰ Felski notes: 'The notion of a purely 'feminine' writing is defended as a utopian moment within feminism by several commentators: *l'écriture féminine* is to be understood as a liberating form of writing which cannot as yet be even fully imagined. It may well be the case that a utopian perspective constitutes a necessary inspiratory vision for feminism as an oppositional ideology' (Felski, 1989: 42).

⁸¹ Felski notes: '[n]evertheless, this vision of an autonomous women's language and aesthetic also appear to generate intense anxiety; by claiming that women's writing must be radically *other* than anything which has gone before, feminism sets itself the hopeless task of generating a new aesthetic by means of a negation of the entirety of existing cultural and literary traditions. As a result, an accusation often leveled at women's writing by feminist critics is that it is not *different* enough, that it fails to excise all traces of male influence from its language, structures or themes. This 'anxiety of influence'

idiosyncratic and mostly inaccessible text). Indeed, it has since occurred to me that this line of thinking itself highlights just how culturally imbued I am, as an artist *and* as a feminist, with the Symbolic Order of the western patriarchy that I have been born into and which has thus inevitably shaped my modes of thinking. Thus, the concept of *écriture féminine* is a tempting but difficult choice for the creative writer concerned with feminist linguistics and the questioning of patriarchal values, questioning not only the quality of the writing that is to be produced, but the quality of the thinking that inspires the writing.

This is the temptation of *écriture féminine*; to create, to write, to rebel, to revolt, and to evolve. *Écriture féminine* can be seen to represent a liberation to those who become caught up in the heady rhetoric of the theory that expresses this act.⁸² This form of writing challenges the writer to go beyond any and all of the confines she may have placed upon her work and to create new forms which will go on to affect further generations, thus contributing to the evolution of thought, writing and creativity from the strictures that the patriarchal (and now postmodern) Symbolic Order has bound around us. At this point then, it is fitting to discuss the critique of *écriture féminine* as essentialist. To précis this argument: liberal and egalitarian feminisms posit that for woman to gain equal status in the world at large she must become as a man, since we live in a patriarchal world which will accept only those who align with patriarchal values. However, radical and postmodern feminisms⁸³ - particularly the latter, which has closely scrutinised psychoanalysis - question

is, I believe, an unavoidable consequence of positing the ideal of an autonomous women's language and aesthetic outside existing literary and linguistic systems' (Felski, 1989:43).

⁸² And indeed, there is a certain *jouissance* that is involved with allowing one's self to become caught up in heady rhetoric. 'When I write,' states Cixous, 'it's everything that we don't know we can be that is written out of me, without exclusions, without stipulation, and everything we will be calls us to the unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love. In one another we will never be lacking.' (Cixous, 1976: 893)

⁸³ In other words, those feminisms which are less concerned with the material status of woman, and rather the ontological, numinous, and psychological states of 'woman'.

patriarchal notions of 'woman' entirely, furthering the debate on the 'essence' of 'woman/man'. In my own work, and this project in particular, I have become wary of accusations of essentialist bias: specifically, in exploring the 'feminine' nature of 'woman', am I relying on the standardized binary oppositions of gender, and therefore am I still caught within the oppressive paradigm of the patriarchal order? To my mind, feminist difference theory represents a logical lifeline out of the mire of the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate.⁸⁴ In terms of this project, feminist difference theory offers a strand of thought that relates to many of the concepts entwined within the novel *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, including female spirituality, female numinous experience and the interior journey.

At this point a parallel can be drawn between sexual difference theory and the theorisations surrounding the Immanent Goddess discussed in Chapter One. Sexual difference theory does not necessarily rely on an assumption of either a psycho-biological definition of the feminine, nor a cultural-symbolic notion of what the feminine is not (according to the masculine). Irigaray has related sexual difference specifically to cultural production:

Sexual difference would represent the horizon of worlds of a fertility as yet unknown, at all events in the west. [I]t would also involve the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry and language: the creation of a new *poetics* . . . For the work of sexual difference to take place, a revolution in thought and ethics is needed. We must reinterpret the whole relationship between subject and discourse, the

⁸⁴ Tong asks: '[A]re women essentially the same as men or fundamentally different from men? . . . [I]s woman's "nature" "plastic" (mutable, ever changing, always becoming something different, in Herclitean flux) or "fixed" (immutable, unchangeable, always remaining the same, in Parmidean status)? Is *gender* ("femininity") an organic outgrowth of sex ("femaleness"), an arbitrary cultural imposition on sex or, more radically, a determinant of sex?' (Tong, 1998: 207)

subject and the world, the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic
and the macrocosmic. (Whitford, 1992: 9-10)

In this sense, difference theory can arguably contain a place for whatever is perceived to be 'female' or 'feminine' - and therefore also possibly what is 'male' and 'masculine', and anything conceivably in-between, outside, through or beyond these definitions -without needing to draw a parallel binary opposition to define what it is not. Given this mode of thinking, 'feminine' and 'female' can therefore encompass many more positive and negative notions, many more ideas and descriptions of feminist aims and ways of being. *Écriture féminine*, then, can become a mode of expression by which all aspects of 'female being' can be explored, rather than relying on already defined binary notions of 'femaleness' and creative praxis to set up an opposition to 'patriarchal maleness' and already defined literary structures. Like the concept of the Goddess of Ten Thousand Faces, writing related to *écriture féminine* through difference theory can move beyond boundaries delimited by notions of binary opposition, essentialism, and literary convention, and create a site of resistance and expression where the interior journey may express itself in whatever form it chooses.

Finally, the concept that *écriture féminine* is by necessity experimental, avant-garde, a theoretical sleight-of-hand that proclaims unconventional writing subversive and therefore 'female,' is not one that I can justify. Rita Felski examined this notion at length in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), where she stated:

It is impossible to make a convincing case for the claim that there is anything inherently feminine or feminist in experimental writing as such; if one examines the texts of *l'écriture féminine*, for example, the only gender-specific elements exist on the level of content, as in metaphors of the female

body. The attempt to argue a necessary connection between feminism and experimental form, when not grounded in a biologicistic thinking which affirms a spontaneous link between a 'feminine' textuality and the female body, relies on a theoretical sleight-of-hand that associates or equates the avant-garde and the 'feminine' as forms of marginalized dissidence vis-à-vis a monolithic and vaguely defined 'patriarchal bourgeois humanism' which is said to permeate the structures of symbolic discourse. The problem with defining linguistic subversion as 'feminine' is that it renders the term so broad as to become meaningless - almost any examples of experimental literature in the last hundred years can be seen as 'feminine' - and this conflation of questions of modern literary style with an ideology of the feminine as quintessentially marginal and outside the Symbolic Order is of little help in theorizing the historically specific locations of women in culture and society (Felski, 1989: 5-6).

Furthermore, I would add that the notion of *écriture féminine* as a form of 'feminine' expression relies on an acceptance of the binary pairings of patriarchy as a fixed social construct. It is this 'fixed' and 'accepted' norm that I question through *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, and despite the fact that the writing produced a text which can not be wholly qualified as 'straight' *écriture féminine*, the text questions and experiments with theoretical concepts and pushes the boundaries of the conventions such as purely linguistic experimentation.

Écriture féminine and creativity

For the creative writer, the intention to write and the production of a text are two different things which are not easily captured by theoretical constructs. My intention at the beginning of this project was to write a text in a ‘subversive,’ ‘poetic,’ ‘linguistically challenging’ style which would accord with the aims of *écriture féminine*, that is, to ‘write from the body’ of the main protagonist, Regina Fischer. Once the novel was underway, I realized that the characters around Regina Fischer - specifically the male characters - were being written as stereotypical ‘masculine’ foils to Regina and her ‘female’ voice. In fact, all of the characters themselves seemed one-dimensional, and seemed to serve to prove a (feminist) point rather than to express the lived experience of unique human beings.⁸⁵ From the point of a theoretical analysis, the initial novel draft demonstrated a certain critique and/or parody of essentialism and binary polarity, but from the point of creative and literary output, it read as a flat, platitudinous manuscript that was trying to prove a hackneyed ideological point. This certainly did not contribute to the development of new ideas nor exploration of literary, creative and theoretical boundaries.

Whilst Felski argues that *écriture féminine* cannot be viewed as a politically subversive mode of ‘feminine’ expression (since due to its marginality it does not offer a broader analysis of women within culture and society), my readings of feminist creative writers who have experimented with ‘feminine’ and ‘female’ writing showed that writing itself is foremost a creative act, and therefore cannot be theorized whilst the creative process is occurring. The intention of a text might be in place before the text is written, but the writing of the text is an organic process and cannot be bound by

⁸⁵ And in the case of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, of non-human beings as well - since both the Holy Mother and Klement Zwespenbauer are numinous.

strict guidelines without the risk of damage to the final production. Mary Daly says of the writing process of *Gyn/Ecology* (1991):

There was nothing contrived about this process. I did not sit down and think that this work required a 'different' style' and then attempt to create it. I simply risked leaping into the process of gynocentric writing, which meant that the work, in a real sense, created itself. (Daly, 1991: xxi)

Daly is specifically concerned with gynocritic writing, but raises an important question: is 'leaping into writing' part of the process of *écriture féminine*, or is it part of the broader process of creativity in which both the female and male partake? Marguerite Duras also comments on the notion of 'feminine' writing:

I think 'feminine literature' is an organic, translated writing . . . translated from blackness, from darkness. Women have been in darkness for centuries. They don't know themselves. Or only poorly. And when women write, they translate this darkness . . . Men don't translate. They begin from a theoretical platform that is already in place, already elaborated. The writing of women is really translated from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language . . . I think feminine literature is a violent, direct literature and that, to judge it, we must not - and this is the main point I want to make - start all over again, take off from a theoretical platform . . . Reverse everything. Make women the point of departure in judging, make darkness the point of departure in judging what men call light, make obscurity the point of departure in judging what men call clarity. (Duras, 1980: 174-175)

Duras seems to be saying that the 'masculine' language acts as a filter upon experience and 'feminine' language acts as a direct voice of experience. By making 'women' the 'point of departure,' a description of an experience may be written not 'from the body' per se, but in a way which does not either utilize or rely upon tenets of 'masculine' filters or patriarchal binary oppositions. In this sense, whilst the practice of *écriture féminine* is conventionally applied in fictional texts written by females utilizing this 'unfiltered' writing to express the experience of a female character,⁸⁶ as I began writing the male protagonist of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* and the organic creative process began to unfold, the question arose: why not apply the 'unfiltered' approach of 'feminine' writing to a male character as well?

***Écriture féminine* and the 'male'**

The male protagonist in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*⁸⁷ undergoes his own interior journey through the medium of his private journal into which he records his most personal and 'unfiltered' thoughts regarding not only his research of Regina Fischer's tale, but also his own experiences and reactions to Regina Fischer and her effect upon him. Like Regina, the Ghostwriter experiences a journey of the soul throughout the novel, and expresses this journey through his own form of *écriture féminine*, an oppositional style of writing to that which is practised in his profession. The

⁸⁶ Texts that utilize *écriture féminine* to describe the world of a female protagonist include: Cixous (1991b), *The Book of Promethea*; Divakaruni (1997), *The Mistress of Spices*; Kynstler (1989), *The Moon Under Her Feet*; and Wolf (1984), *Cassandra*. Felski states: 'Although not all women-centered texts are feminist, however, it is certainly true that most feminist literary texts have until now been centred around a female protagonist, a consequence of the key status of subjectivity to second-wave feminism, in which the notion of female experience, whatever its theoretical limitations, has been a guiding one' (Felski, 1989: 14).

⁸⁷ I have affectionately termed this character the 'Ghostwriter,' a pun on his profession - writing another's story - as well as the subject matter he is writing about - the haunting of Regina by a ghost.

application of the *écriture féminine* label to writing by a man seems heretical in itself. Christine di Stefano describes how gender under the critique of postmodernism branches off into two streams: that of the acceptance of ‘gender [as a] nearly universal feature of all human societies’ and that of ‘an astonishingly wide-ranging cross-cultural variability [in which] it is not always that case that “difference” translates into “unequal”’ (di Stefano, 1990: 64). According to di Stefano, gender differences can be seen as ‘basic’ when they are collectively an inescapable and over-determined structure that produces a world which is both gender-divided and gender-dominated, a legacy of the humanist Enlightenment project. Postmodernism has challenged the idea of ‘basic’ gender differences by challenging the ‘core assumptions’ of ‘basic gender difference’ and showing that these assumptions are as ‘guilty of the same totalization with which humanism was previously charged’ (di Stefano, 1990: 65).

Creatively speaking, di Stefano’s insights are tantalizing and pertinent to the characterisation of the Ghostwriter in *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*. From my own perspective as a writer of historical account, it would have been a simple task to write the Ghostwriter as ‘basically gendered’ with the assumptions of ‘basic gender’ built into his character and his psychological, physical and intellectual expressions. These assumptions would have accorded with the Ghostwriter’s education and his role as a Roman Catholic priest, or alternatively, the historical determinants of his subjectivity. During the first stages of writing *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, the Ghostwriter was written as a ‘basically gendered’ character so as to highlight Regina’s trauma and subsequent rebellion, and as a counter to the technique of *écriture féminine* being applied to Regina’s interior journey. However, the organic nature of creative writing itself began to evolve the character in quite a radically different way.⁸⁸ The

⁸⁸ The creative process is akin to what Isaac Bonewits (amongst others) terms magic (see Bonewits (1989), *Real Magic*; also Starhawk (1989), *The Spiral Dance*; and Worth (1999), *Crone’s Book of*

Ghostwriter took on a life of his own, particularly in his private, personal reactions to Regina and her 'absurdity', so that the agenda of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* changed by the sheer force of creativity. The notions of *écriture féminine* as 'writing from the body' and 'against the grain' of patriarchal linguistic and symbolic organization seeped into the Ghostwriter's personal musings as a result of his psyche encountering the traumatized laundry-maid whose own spiritual landscape included traditions that the Ghostwriter's hierarchical, masculinist conditioning would normally reject outright. Regina Fischer completely destabilizes the Ghostwriter/priest. The Ghostwriter himself muses in one of his private journal entries:

It is difficult for me to not write. It seems unnatural. This seems to be one of those moments when the Divine spark of inspiration has left me and I have nothing within me to overcome this lapse into nothingness. If I have ever come close to the outmoded notions of the essentially perverse nature of woman, now is the time. Where is my reason? Where is the logical stability of my knowledge and learning? I am astounded, and cannot think clearly to write down what it is that I have to report. My interview with the laundry-girl has left me without words. Even this illogical garble that I am writing now can express nothing of what I am feeling, impressions and moods that I must quiet within, since these emotions seem to be affecting the clear narrative of what has just passed (Thomas: 31).

Magical Words). The essential thesis is that thought creates action creates form. Words form an essential part of thought in a literate society such as our western society, and certainly in the writer's mind. Thus, words are magic because they create action and thus form. Hence the idea that a written character can 'take on a life of her or his own' as a separate entity from the writer is not thoroughly nonsensical (although those of a rationalist/materialist bent might ascribe this to a pathological disorder such as Dissociative Identity Disorder). That the Ghostwriter broke free from my creative control can only be said to be a testament to his own will and his own capacity for intellectual/emotional independence.

In terms of theory, this dialectic of action and reaction between the characters acts upon itself and the writing in the following way. First, assumptions of 'basic gender' are exploded: conventional binarisms are explored and then discarded in a context and setting which historically assumes these binaries as a conventional condition of viewing this era. Second, the notion of *écriture féminine* as a 'violent, direct' (Duras, 1980: 174-5), volcanic⁸⁹ discourse situated outside the patriarchal Symbolic Order extends not only to the female protagonist, but to the male protagonist as well. This challenges the criticism of *écriture féminine* as essentialist, by locating the act of *écriture féminine* in the writing, in the character, whether female or male, and in the experimentation with sites of resistance that are apart from the patriarchal Symbolic Order. In this sense, *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* does not allow *écriture féminine* to remain in the site of the 'feminine' but rather in an interstitial site - an extension of Showalter's 'wild zone'⁹⁰ - which explodes essentialist notions of binary 'necessities' and 'basic gender difference'. *Écriture féminine* does not work here according to notions of basic gender and binary oppositions; rather it is a creative force that sets up literary and historical complexities that challenge conservative techniques and assumptions about both writing and gender, and creates a site that operates outside the patriarchal Symbolic Order. In doing so, it thus acts as a radical, experimental, and experiential site in which

⁸⁹ Cixous, 1975: 889 further elucidates the 'volcanic' nature of *écriture féminine*.

⁹⁰ Elaine Showalter describes the 'wild zone' as a space that is entirely outside the sphere of the patriarchal, demonstrating this by a diagram of two interlocking circles. One circle represents the 'female' and the other the 'male', whereby the patriarchy includes the 'male' elements of the Symbolic Order as well as part of the 'female' elements of the Symbolic Order. The part of the second circle (representing the 'female') that does not intersect at all with the first circle (representing the 'male') is described as the 'wild zone', where 'female' has no 'male' influences whatsoever (Showalter, 1985: 262-263). My notion of an interstitial site posits the area of intersection between the two circles as smaller, but as a zone where both female and male are able to deconstruct the Symbolic Order.

characters, writing and writer may explore the meaning of literary resistance and challenge traditional writerly functions.

The Ghostwriter is psychically destabilized and thus forced to examine his own preconceived ideas. From a cleric who cannot 'understand' 'the witch' Regina Fischer's words, he travels through an unsettling interior journey which results in his listening to her without question, without interruption. He has transcended his simplistic function - which would otherwise incorporate the conservative and essentialist notions of 'masculine'⁹¹ - and become a complex character who reacts to a complex problem. It is also historically possible that the Ghostwriter might have been less isolated from progressive ideas regarding women, witchcraft and religious philosophy than supposed. The contemporaneous philosopher Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, for instance, argued for a certain skepticism when assessing the matter of witchcraft and the feminine. In *Witchcraft in Europe*, Kors and Peters state:

Examples of selective and systematic scepticism were manifest already in the sixteenth century . . . Montaigne, whose systematic scepticism was widely influential, demonstrated how easily men might deceive themselves when dealing with the unusual, and asked, in the face of the doubts he had raised, if men dare consider themselves certain enough to kill a fellow man in the name of such tenuous beliefs . . . [M]ost educated men lived within two worlds by the late seventeenth century, accepting much of traditional belief but adding to it a new awareness of the appeal of natural and mechanistic explanation where such were possible . . . Men increasingly felt that witchcraft was born of fear of, and confusion about, the created universe (Kors and Peters, 1972: 311-3).

⁹¹ These would also possibly involve his classification as 'the enemy'.

It is therefore reasonable to suppose that the Ghostwriter might have had access to this mode of reasoning. There may have been allusion to Montaigne's motto, 'Que sais-je?' or 'What do I know?' in the Ghostwriter's education, although it is more likely that the Ghostwriter - who is ambitious - would have chosen to align himself with the tenets of his institution rather than adopt progressive ways of thinking. Nevertheless, as the Ghostwriter is exposed to Regina, her destabilizing behaviour and thinking act as a catalyst for him to question his own beliefs. The Ghostwriter's response to the challenge of Regina Fischer is to peel away from his doctrinaire perceptions of the 'feminine' and to question his own relationship to not only his task - that of taking down Regina's statement as a text encoded with a certain political/spiritual agenda - but also his relationship to himself and his place in the world. In effect, the Ghostwriter, through the act of his (and my) *écriture féminine*, becomes a more self-reflexive thinker who does ask the question 'What do I know?'

However, for my novel to answer this question through an acceptance of the Ghostwriter's work by his Church would have presented a utopian solution to the 'problem' of Regina Fischer, which in my opinion was unlikely. It would not have been possible for the seventeenth-century Church to accept the Ghostwriter's findings or writings about Regina Fischer's experience.

***Écriture féminine* and the 'female'**

As stated previously, the original intention for *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* was that the novel be written in a continuous stream-of-consciousness style which practiced the avant-garde and 'radical' techniques of *écriture féminine*. Thus my idea

was to create a text which conformed, more or less, to Felski's notion of this style of writing:

An experimental or avant-garde feminist text would thus be characterized by a formal openness, allowing the reader a certain freedom in negotiating a position, but always in relation to a certain set of political ideas . . . Hence the formally experimental text embodies the most radical challenge to patriarchal structures, which are embodied in the very structures of symbolic language (Felski, 1989: 32).

Despite the aesthetic limitations I identified in the early stages of trying to create a sustained 'formal experimental text' of novel length, the challenge to allow a female character to explore some of the linguistic, literary and political techniques of 'female' writing provided me with a very private site of expressive freedom. The challenge to write a female voice from a foundation of 'certain set[s] of political ideas' created instead a linguistic openness, which, although subconsciously aware of its patriarchal underpinnings, sought to explore a voice which would otherwise remain unheard in any sort of representation.⁹² Thus I prefer here to term Regina's monologue as a private space which does not transect any of the other spaces she inhabits, whether the patriarchal sites (church, interview room, place of work), the female sites within the patriarchy (laundry, bedroom, confessional) or the resistant sites (the cunning-women's hut, private conversations with her sister). This private site, where Regina's own form of *écriture féminine* occurs, may be located within a public site, such as the section 'Regina Prays,' (Thomas b: 304-318) which is located within St Martin's Cathedral itself. However the private site, being a psychic rather than a material space,

allows for a much freer flow of expressive ideas, narrative and language. For instance, in the section where Regina asks advice from a priest regarding the haunting, the priest asks her: “‘My child, why would the devil come to you?’” (Thomas b: 168). Despite her traumatic experience, Regina reacts by thinking: ‘Is he saying that the devil would not tempt/a laundry-maid?/Is there no/ use/which the devil/ has/for me?’ (Thomas b: 168). This depicts the fleeting thoughts that run through her mind and are the immediate reaction to the moment. Such unstructured moments in the novel reflect the immediately personal, highly individual, and independent sense that perhaps *écriture féminine* is striving for, as opposed to the impersonal, structured, formal expressions of more traditional literature. Thus it is possible to see that as a site of resistance, *écriture féminine* within *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* extends beyond ‘writing from the body’⁹³ into the realm of writing from the soul, which as previously explored through the notion of the Immanent Goddess, can also be taken out of binary oppositional hierarchies.

Regina’s internal monologue is composed entirely of her own sensibilities. The intention of writing her voice according to the technique of *écriture féminine* determined that a space be made to record her completely personal and private inner conversations without the censorship of social constraint. In reality, though, as a female, feminist writer writing in the twenty-first century, my own consciousness is informed by a body of knowledge and experience to which Regina Fischer would not have had access. Thus, Regina’s internal monologue exhibits a consciousness impossible in her own historical context. However, the aim of this project is to explore and cross the boundaries (and possibly the confines) of the filters that construct ‘the world’ of the western patriarchal Symbolic Order, through the

⁹² Certainly not a voice heard at all in Gaibl’s *Narratio Rei Admirabilis*, in which Regina Fischer is not once given a word to say.

application of a deliberate feminist/female consciousness and style. The importance of the internal monologue as a site of resistance - be it political, gender-based, or simply born of the sheer anxiety and alienation of the character - must be stressed. In *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, this monologue becomes an important avenue for the expression of a very personal *écriture féminine* that is highly private, but still delineates a psychic space that cannot be intruded upon by outside influences and which becomes a site of resistance to the external dangers that threaten Regina Fischer. As such, during the conversations between Regina and the Ghostwriter in the first part of the novel, Regina is so involved with (and possibly overwhelmed by) her own internal functions that the Ghostwriter cannot understand what she is trying to communicate to him. Her own resistance to his attempts to shape her story to suit his own needs renders her unintelligible to him and almost silent, yet she is in full control of her own knowledge, her own story and her own willingness to communicate her experience. It could be posited here that silence can form a technique of *écriture féminine* and thus resistance to a Symbolic Order that is based on the logic of the logos.⁹⁴ The novelist Christa Wolf has questioned the importance of speech in forming identity:

But isn't the word the very thing that has taken over control of our inner life? The fact that I lack words here: doesn't this mean that I am losing myself? How quickly does lack of speech turn into a lack of identity? (Wolf, 1984: 161)

⁹³ See specifically Cixous, 1976: 886

⁹⁴ See Shlain (1998), *The Alphabet versus the Goddess*. In *The Alphabet versus the Goddess* (1998), Leonard Shlain describes the process whereby the patriarchal logos - a structure based on logic, grammar and non-pictographic writing - overcame a more wholistic, symbolic and unstructured social order that he associates with a more matrifocal Symbolic Order.

To the Ghostwriter, perhaps, Regina at first has no formal 'identity' because he does not understand what she is trying to communicate to him; that is, what she is saying makes no sense to the structures in which he is trained to think and express himself.

He says:

'But I cannot understand you, Miss Regina, You screech and howl like a wild thing, and your words make no sense. And stop twitching up and down like that, I simply cannot understand you. I am almost tempted,' he scratches his tonsure, rough and unshaven, before he continues, 'to hand you back to the investigators of witches. Speak like a normal person, or a servant, for Heaven's sake! You babble too much like a woman!' (Thomas b: 16).

The argument for silence as a mode of resistance is appealing when one considers that the western patriarchal order is based on a phallogocentric order and thus all speech and literary effort is based in this order. But where does silence leave 'woman' and 'female expression'? To write in Cixousian 'white ink'⁹⁵ as opposed to phallogocentric 'black ink' is tempting, but in all likelihood would not produce a literary text that actively explores how resistance to the patriarchal binary symbolic schema is possible within the particular historical context of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*. Even though at first Regina 'has no words' and therefore to the Ghostwriter 'has no identity', her resistance lies in her insistence on the recognition and validation of her own 'truth'. Even though Regina is silent at first, and deliberately obscure, difficult, withdrawn and obdurate (all very 'unfeminine' modes of behaviour within the binary

⁹⁵ Cixous posits that 'white ink' is related to breast milk and thus wholly female, as opposed to the more phallic pen-and-ink signifier of patriarchal writing and language (Cixous, 1976: 881). The image of 'white ink' also touches on the signifier of silence discussed by Wolf (1984: 161).

polarity of male/female), her behaviour acts as a destabilizing force for both the Ghostwriter and herself. This destabilization leads, eventually, to Regina's expression of her self and her story and the Ghostwriter's willingness to suspend his own preconceived notions and accept Regina as her self, rather than as 'witch', 'girl', 'servant', or even 'saint'.

Hence, the novel *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* engages in a challenge to traditional concepts of *écriture féminine* that posit this style as a form that pertains only to the female language. Whilst utilizing this literary technique to depict Regina Fischer's own internal reaction to the world that seeks to shape her and thus silence her, *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* extends the metaphor of *écriture féminine* to the internal journey of the Ghostwriter, and his destabilisation by Regina Fischer. This psychic shift renders him unable to function in the typical rational manner of the patriarchal Symbolic Order, and therefore takes the Ghostwriter character into a site of resistance that otherwise would have been limited to a stalemate of binary polarity from which it could not disengage and progress. Thus *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* breaks new ground for *écriture féminine*, allowing a new site of resistance to be created, and a disengagement from the polarities of feminism/patriarchy that have been locked together for so long and do not move forward constructively.

Conclusion

Future Directions

A novel is an organic growth. Despite all the best intentions of the novelist at the beginning of the project, despite all the best laid plans, well-crafted storylines and sensibly reasoned themes, once the writing process begins it is impossible to continue on the path preordained by the seemingly omnipotent author. A novel shapes itself, its characters grow personalities beyond the scope of the first inspiration that causes this organic growth, this new life, to be created. In a sense, it is almost a temptation to fate to decide the landscape of the novel before the novelist has entered that same landscape. The novelist finds herself in a strange world of new experiences, new responses to these experiences, and eventually new understandings not only of the story that is being crafted, but of herself as well. A novel is like a majick spell, a conscious bending of mind and matter to reconstruct the world. The novel writing process cannot but change the life of the novelist, the novel itself a catalyst that forces the novelist to examine her entire universe and amend any changes needed there. *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* has caused such a shift in my life, as events cause a shift in the lives of the protagonists, Regina Fischer and the Ghostwriter. Marina Warner points out that within narrative, the teller and the tale are always inextricably intertwined (Warner, 1994: 25), and there is little doubt in my mind that the creative process of writing tends to throw the writer into the cauldron of the Goddess, stir her around, boil her to bits, shake her up, and allow her to resurface with a completely different worldview. This was certainly not my expectation when I began the project of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*.

As a writer, I have learned that the creation of new ideas, new expressions and new avenues of creative and philosophical thought occur through the organic process of writing. Writing is a journey, and the journey of *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* has taken me from a set of theories and values to the formulation of new spaces for exploration and new concepts that peel away from values that seem to me no longer relevant to the twenty-first century. In examining the binary dualities of the western Symbolic Order, this thesis has discovered that there is a theoretical and practical stalemate between the partners locked in a power struggle that has no resolution, and no scope for evolution. In searching for and finding the numinous female space, this thesis has located a site of resistance that not only transcends the polarities of the western patriarchy (and western feminism's insistence on defining itself within the context of these polarities), but also includes a very personal and very tangible site of resistance that is otherwise unknowable when framed in conventional terms of duality.

Many of the theories and notions explored through *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* intersect and intertwine with each other and so become inseparable. *Écriture féminine* could not exist without the interior journey which could not exist without ideas of the Other which could not exist without the numinous female and the female Divine in the novel. However all these intertwinings led to a departure from some of the received wisdoms of the theories explored, and certainly of the writing techniques utilized throughout *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*. Under the cumulative force of the organic process of creative writing, and the methodology of theoretical analysis, *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* came to express what this thesis terms a site of resistance to the patriarchal forces that make up the Symbolic Order of western culture. Through this a space was made that stands apart from the binary polarities that inform much of modern and postmodern cultural thinking. In this thesis, both the

novel and exegesis have reworked the concepts of *écriture féminine* to include a male voice (as well as a female voice) that searches for its interior self in a site of linguistic and psychological resistance to the Symbolic Order. This thesis also examines the concepts of patriarchal binary polarity and creates a site of resistance where the 'feminine' and the 'masculine' are no longer defined within the power-locked duality of the western patriarchal Symbolic Order. Through analysis and exposition of the female Divine, this thesis examines a space which at once encompasses the macro-level of spirit and the micro-level of the interior journey, again stepping away from the binary polarities that create a separation between 'God' and 'man', and instead entering a realm of the 'Immanent Goddess.' Lastly, through the problematization of the 'interior journey' and the 'authentic voice', this thesis uncovers a silence, a distance between past and present that renders time as a separation of understanding and human experience, and in its place creates a transhistorical space in which the past affects the present as much as the present shapes the past.

As a writer, I have been creatively challenged to use words in a way which expresses ideas that are complex and almost occult: to find the hidden language of the psyche that otherwise is unknowable and inexpressible. This entails not only *thinking* the text but *feeling* it as well, which contains elements of not only Hélène Cixous' 'writing from the body,' but also what this thesis terms 'writing from the soul'. Through this process I have had to learn self-awareness not only for myself as author but for my characters, who have shown me that all creation takes on a distinct life of its own despite the dictatorial intentions of the creator. It is not an understatement to say that *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh* has been an evolution for me, not only in personal terms but in creative and theoretical terms as well. I am not the same person

as I was three years ago, just as Regina is not the same character she was three years ago, nor the Ghostwriter, nor the entire theme and drive of the project.

I contend that the critique of the patriarchal framework upon which the entire discourse of feminism hangs needs to be re-evaluated to evolve further the position and assumption of binary duality currently perpetuated as a power struggle under patriarchy. The novel *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, and its theoretical exegesis, form the result of a process of growth, not only on a personal level for myself as the author, but also in terms of the re-examination of feminist theory and creative practice. The notion that all life is in constant evolution permeates *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*, and it is through the creation and examination of sites of resistance that this evolution can occur, for a constant stasis of ideas and creative impulses would create nothing new. And with the new comes a great excitement, a desire to walk into the future and examine what is there to shape, what potential there is to grow.

Appendix One

The Charge of the Star Goddess

The Charge of the Star Goddess is a meditation upon the relationship of Goddess and Nature. Practitioners of Wicca debate its origin, which in my belief is an act which shifts the focus from liberating spirituality from dogma and hierarchy to a petty debate of ownership that still relates to androcentric theological rivalry. Janet and Stewart Farrar describe this debate adequately in *A Witches Bible* (1981). However, there are many different versions of this meditation which can be absorbed by each practitioner and into each individual spiritual practice (see for instance the Re-Formed Congregation of the Goddess' version of the Charge).

Hear ye the words of the Star Goddess: she in the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven, and whose body encircles the universe:

I who am the beauty of the green earth, and the white Moon among the stars, and the mystery of the waters, and the desire of the heart of man, call until thy soul. Arise, and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature, who gives life to the universe. From me all things proceed, and unto me all things must return; and before my face, beloved of Gods and of men, let thine innermost divine self be enfolded in the rapture of the infinite. Let my worship be within the heart that rejoiceth; for behold, all acts of love and pleasre are my rituals. And therefore let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honour and humility, mirth and reverence within you. And thou who thinkest to seek for me, know they seeking and yearning shall avail thee not unless thou knowest the mystery; that if that which thou seekest thou findest not within thee, thou wilt never find it without thee. For behold, I have been with thee from the beginning; and I am that which is attained at the end of desire (Farrar, 1981: 43).

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Archival Material

I have included this material as part of the integral fieldwork research for *A Knowledge of Spirit and Flesh*. My original project was to include the Countess Erzsebet Báthory as a character within the text, and during my fieldwork I was privileged to view original copies in the Bytca Archives of personal correspondence between Countess Báthory and her family, which is listed below:

Šoba Bytca, OK-TK inv-c, 391, 2 fólie, Pavol Nádasdy, 23/2/1611.

Šoba Bytca, OK-TK inv-c, 682, 2 fólie, list Mikuláša Zrinskeho, Jurajovi Thurzove o príprave zatknutia A Báthoryovey, 17/12/1610.

Šoba Bytca, OK-TK inv-c, 896, 2 fólie, list Juraja Thurz u Aibete Czoborovej u knutností páchaná A Báthoryovej v Cacticiah, 30/12/1610.

Šoba Bytca, OK-TK inv-c, 390, 2 fólie, František Nádasdy, 3/1/1604.

Šoba Bytca, OK-TK inv-c, 682, 2 fólie, list Mikuláša Zrinskeho palatínom Jurajovi Thurzovi 'prospect A Báthoryovey', 12/2/1611.

Šoba Bytca, OK-TK inv-c, 609, 2 fólie, list Stanislava Thurza Jurajovi Thurzovi o smrti A Báthoryovey, 25/8/1614.

Šoba Bytca, OK-TK inv-c, 59, 2 fólie, Vlastorníne pisany list Alzbety Báthoryovej Jurajovi Thurzov, 1/12/1606.

