

The Wicked Wonder: Narration

A plague has fallen upon the land. The king and queen's daughter has gone missing, and ever since, they've lost the spirit to reign. Corruption takes root among the governors as an unquiet darkness spreads from the heart of the kingdom. The women are no longer able to conceive, nor will any crop in the fields grow. Clouds of grey blot out sun and moon alike, and the people wonder if their gods have forsaken them.

One morning a young shepherdess walks with her flock through the forest. The blight has forced them to seek out pastures further from home than usual. Her companions are nervous, so she squeezes her shepherd's crook and surveys the wood for any danger. "What is it, my friends?" She then sees that further down the path a kingsnake lies coiled at the foot of an enormous oak whose crisscrossing branches lose themselves in the clouds, disappearing in the distance. "I wonder how the world would look from atop this great tree." Stretching her staff bravely, she urges the serpent to make way...

She lets go of one world and begins climbing, counting her steps to a new one. All day long she climbs, without even reaching the branches, and must pass the night at a fork in the tree. The next day she rises on to the foliage, and only toward evening comes to a village nestled in the branches, where she is fed and sheltered for the night. In the morning she ascends still further and about midday reaches the top, where lies a shining white glass castle inhabited by a young woman—a king's daughter, held prisoner by a wicked magician. The shepherdess sojourns with the princess, and the princess gives her whatever her heart desires. She even sews her a cloak, as a token of their new companionship, and allows the shepherdess to enter all the rooms of the castle—all except one, the innermost chamber.

In curious abandon, she unlocks the door and finds a raven fixed to the wall by three nails. One through his throat, and two more through his wings. "I am so thirsty," he pleads. "Won't you please give me a drink?" Moved by compassion, she offers the raven water. With each drop, a nail falls out: One... two... three... the raven flies loose, as the princess enters: "Oh, the spell how it lures me over and over again. By now it shouldn't be long... I—, I'm always borne back, to this snow white light home."

*His irises always watching, as she dances upon the shore
Selene could not refrain at last and opened the double door
The hour is close to midnight, in a land beyond the rain
The weeping Pleiades wester, bound homeward in daisy chains*

He's come back again to fetch me away...

The dream is calling... sleep my child.

And one fine morning, the princess has vanished. The shepherdess searches the castle, but cannot find her anywhere. She clenches her fists in rage, crying out: "Why did I believe that wicked devil, why didn't I see through it? Now he's come again and taken my beloved! Toll the alarm bell!" And the shepherdess sets out in quest of the princess.

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Along the journey, she meets three friends. The first is the doctor of imagination, whose magic crystal ball lets him see distant events as though nearby. The second is the knight of true faith, whose lance and horse make him a formidable warrior. And the third is the fierce lioness, whose keen senses can track any game. The friends offer to help the shepherdess on her mission. The doctor sees in his crystal ball that the princess is imprisoned in a nearby hunting-lodge. The lioness picks up the princess' scent from the cloak and points the way. The knight, brandishing his lance, leads the party as together they set out to free the princess.

The shepherdess finds the lodge and the princess, but is told that escape is impossible because of the magic three-legged white-winged horse who would infallibly warn his master. Against all odds, the couple attempts to flee. As they retreat, the hunter mounts his white horse and flies through the air in pursuit, howling "surrender the princess!" The hunter overtakes them and a great battle ensues. The lioness bears her teeth, while the knight raises his blade; the shepherdess swings her staff and the doctor clutches his crystal ball.

At first, the band of friends seems to prevail, but then the hunter raises his hand in the air, and with the help of his winged horse, summons a great wind that blows the friends to the ground and pulls the princess toward him. The friends are defeated, but because the shepherdess has saved his life as a raven, the hunter spares them and gallops off again with the princess.

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The shepherdess creeps back to the lodge and plots with the princess to coax from the hunter the secret of his horse. Hiding under the bed that night, she learns of a valley where a witch breeds magic horses. Whoever can guard her colts for three days may choose a steed as their prize. The witch used to give a gift of twelve lambs, to appease the twelve wolves living nearby, but did not to the hunter, and while riding away the wolves tore a leg from his horse. The shepherdess makes haste to seek out the witch.

When she finds the witch, the shepherdess agrees to guard the colts for three days on condition that she receive not only a horse of her choosing, but twelve lambs as well. "So be it," says the witch, "if you can catch them!" And she commands the colts to take flight. "But first a drink my dearie." The brandy makes the shepherdess fall asleep, and the colts escape. On the first day, she catches them with the help of the doctor of imagination, who is able to seek them out in his crystal ball. On the second day, she wrangles the colts with the help of the knight of true faith, and his lance and horse. And on the third day, the fierce lioness uses her keen senses to help track them down.

Having overcome the witch's trials, the shepherdess may now choose her reward. The witch's three young daughters tell the shepherdess which horse their mother rides: The best one, the color of fire, named Aethon-Zeus. "I choose that one," says the shepherdess. But when she isn't looking, the witch pierces the horse's four hoofs and sucks the marrow from his bones. Upon departing the horse will grow deathly weak and pale, unable to go on. From the marrow she bakes a sweet cake and gives it to the shepherdess for her journey. "For you my dearie, should you get hungry."

But the shepherdess feeds the cake to the feeble, stumbling horse, who suddenly recovers his former strength and color. The sun has set and the shepherdess must hurry if she is to climb out of the witch's valley ahead of the approaching storm and get beyond the rain. As she nears the rim, there appear twelve hungry wolves, who encircle her and move in to attack. But the shepherdess uses the twelve lambs to quiet the twelve wolves, who feast as she makes her escape.

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As she rides her fiery horse across the threshold of the witch's realm, a red flash from his mane sweeps them both off their feet and time suddenly stands still. Floating suspended like a butterfly, the shepherdess sees her entire journey pass before her eyes as in a dream: the serpent lying coiled at the foot of the enormous oak; the princess and the raven; many days spent at the castle and its forbidden door; the doctor with his crystal ball, the knight with his lance, and the keen-scented lioness; the hunter and his snow white horse; the witch, her colts, and the wolves. Then the vision drifts back earlier to her home and flock; to the queen and king and the plague upon the land. Then suddenly as quickly as it began, another flash of red fills the shepherdess' sight, and plunges her back into the present. Falling to her knees, she vows: "I must save my beloved, whom I love as myself."

They return to the lodge and find the princess but must again do battle as they try to escape. Finally, the shepherdess slings her billowing cloak over the hunter's head, allowing her and the princess to break free and ride off. But the hunter mounts his white-winged three-legged horse and sets off in pursuit. As he approaches, the four-legged, fiery horse cries out to the white one, "brother, throw him off!" The hunter is tossed to the ground and trampled to pieces.

*Torn apart, liver from gut, limb by limb,
by Aethon's breath burnt,
flames fanned by white wings,
body scorched, broken, spurned, and cut.*

From the charred, dismembered corpse emerges the serpent, who liberated gives gratitude to the friends for sacrificing the dark magician. The wicked one dead, the shepherdess helps the princess onto the white-winged horse, and the friends ride home to the king and queen who are overjoyed to see their daughter and heir. In light of their bravery, the lioness, knight, and doctor are named protectors of the kingdom. The fiery and white horses beg the shepherdess and princess to strangle them, so as to lift the plague upon the land. This they do with cloak and crook, transforming the horses into a handsome prince and beautiful shepherd. They'd been changed into horses by the wizard, long ago. The four are married. Fertility and balance return to the land. The hard, loving work of governance, stewardship, and parenting begins.

Sometimes they worry and wonder what they would do, would their own daughter go missing. Our lovers and children make us frightened of dying—autonomy eclipsed by communion.