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FEATURES

WHICH WITCH? READING DUBRAVKA UGRESIC'S BABA YAGA LAID AN EGG

“At first you don’t see them,” reads the introduction to *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, Dubravka Ugresic’s contribution to Canongate’s Myths series, “...At first they’re invisible. And then all at once you begin to spot them. They shuffle around the world like armies of elderly angels. One of them peers into your face. She glares at you, her eyes wide, her gaze a pale blue, and voices her request with a proud and condescending tone. She is asking for your help, she needs to cross the street but she cannot do it alone... You feel a pang of sympathy for the old lady, you are moved, you do a good deed, swept by the thrill of gallantry. It is precisely at this moment that you should dig in your heels, resist the siren call, make an effort to lower the temperature of your heart. Remember, their tears do not mean the same thing as yours do. Because if you relent, give in, exchange a few more words, you will be in their thrall. You will slide into a world that you had no intention of entering, because your time has not yet come, your hour, for God’s sake, has not come.”

Baba Yaga, repulsive hag, gatekeeper to a parallel world, half-woman, eater of children, is a frequent character in many folkloric traditions. There’s no better writer to take her on than the brilliantly relentless, sly Dubravka Ugresic -- a writer who bites. A writer who doesn’t have any warm-and-fuzzy side, other than the fact that the targets of her sharp teeth are always more than deserving, and maybe her shrewd sense of humor, although you’d never want to be on the wrong side of that kind of wit. Her study of Baba Yaga -- a triptych of studies, really -- takes on the darkest and most threatening aspects of old-lady fairy tales: the terror of female sexuality, the terror of death, what it means to be classified as a woman in human history. True to form, Ugresic considers contemporary pop culture (Kate Moss, Paris Hilton), rhinoplasty, recent genocides, exile, and dissidence alongside these ancient and timeless panics. She manages a swift, devastating skewer of academia along the way. The paperback came in the mail -- I planned to glance at it before I left -- instead I curled onto a corner of my loveseat and read the whole thing, without stopping for a snack break. There’s a fairy-tale lilt to even the title (I keep turning it into medleys in my head, like, “Baba Yaga wasn’t fuzzy, was she?”), and the study moves along with breathtaking clarity, somehow doing a lot of things at once, hiding everything it conceals and concealing everything it hides.

In the first section, a (probably autobiographical?) writer deals with her ailing mother and a scholar-groupie, the rootless and anagrammatic ABA Bagay, who passive-

aggressively insinuates herself into the writer's life, complete with knowing references to her earlier works. Part two is a present-day fairy tale about three ladies visiting a spa, full of wide-ranging mythological and folkloric references. Part three is Dr. Aba Bagay's commentary and analysis of the previous two texts, and, then there's the sheer power of the ending. In it, Dr. Aba transforms, the subject matter transforms, the place of women in history and in the future transforms, the use and meaning of language transforms, and the reader transforms. Yikes. The reader has the choice to lift up her robe and draw out her sword, the sword every Baba Yaga has to sleep on, and turn herself from invisible to visible, and avenge "the millions and millions of women who have always kept the world going and still keep it going," or. Well. Actually, she has no choice. I think this might apply to male readers, also. The purity of Baba Yaga's gender is quite questionable, she has mysterious traits of man and woman; we all confront and contain her. It is the very sexual order that is implicated.

"I'm convinced that accounts are kept somewhere, that everything is entered on the record somewhere, a painfully huge book of complaints exists somewhere, and the bill will have to be paid. Sooner or later, the time will come." Women (that "hardly negligible half of humankind, after all"), burka-clad women, madwomen, Indian brides and widows who have been burned alive, raped women, beaten women, slaves, will "finally stop bowing down to men with bloodshot eyes, men who are guilty of killing millions of people, and who still have not had enough. For they are the ones who leave a trail of human skulls behind them, yet people's torpid imaginations stick those skulls on the fence of a solitary old woman who lives on the edge of the forest."

I don't think any reader will part with *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* without joining, or fearing, the proletarian Hag International, the crazy army of score-settling Baba Yagas. The question is, how to begin? Maybe we've already begun.

For a person with two arms and water running freely out of a sink in my private apartment, I complain a lot. But, I've been struggling lately with the problem of ageing. It should be a thrilling thing -- sex when you understand your body, a face that reflects your experiences, your ability to practice your art with purity, instead of buckling to outside pressures, a life you can appreciate, because you understand its brevity.

Instead, when you're a girl, sixteen or twenty, everybody thinks you're too young and too eager and you have your life all laid out ahead of you like a grand buffet. They're jealous, and they're mean, and they want you to face up to the tedium and disappointment of the "real world." They chuckle at your hopes and dreams and tell you to come back when you have a bit of experience under your belt (read: when you are less intimidatingly nubile and dewy and you no longer remind them of all they have lost.) But, as you creak past thirty, that same crappy everybody decides you're over the hill and you've already failed and you might as well head out to the ice floe

to drop dead. They hold contests and auditions for people under thirty only. They chuckle at your hopes and dreams and say things like, “Well, we’re not eighteen anymore.” (Suddenly you are part of their gray, shabby “we.”) I imagine it only gets worse when you’re forty, sixty, seventy.

I’ve decided to stop listening to this everybody. I’m not going to take their calls or invite them to my parties anymore. A day lived out when you’re thirty-two or seventy-seven should have the same vibrant possibility as a day lived out when you’re sixteen or twenty. At one age, maybe you have firm skin that no one can resist touching... at another, you are ripped apart by inspiration... at another, you are falling in love for the seventh (and best) time... at another, you liberate yourself from the internalized patterns of your confinement... still later, you save the life of another human being. Maybe these things all happen the year that you are sixteen. But, um, probably not. Also, it’s not like “the End” happens at ninety-seven for all of us. Some of us will cork at three-and-a-half, or eighteen, or fifty-seven. We are all headed in that same direction.

Even works that are supposed to inspire us not to want to die because we’re no longer twenty are bizarrely depressing on this subject -- in her memoir *Somewhere Towards the End*, ninety-one-year-old Diana Athill writes that “one should never, ever *expect* [young people] to want one’s company, or make the kind of claims on them that one makes of a friend of one’s own age. Enjoy whatever they are generous enough to offer, and leave it to that.” Not that I believe that any of us should ever *expect* anyone to want our company or respond to our six am calls to bring over some pureed food and Depends -- but, this implies that, merely by virtue of age, Louise Bourgeois and Buddy Guy are automatically less interesting and desirable than Jeannie from the local mini-mart. (Athill also has an amusingly un-PC section about the kinds of men who are willing to sleep with older or “less glamorous” women.) This kind of thinking turns us from badass rockstar individuals, each with our own unique energy, into stereotypes based on external categories. I bridle at the suggestion that my twenty-year-old company was an enjoyable, generous offering, but that my seventy-five-year-old company will be a lame imposition. Why? Will it be my lack of dewiness? My whiskers and droop? Isn’t what’s important about us the uniqueness of our work, our sensibilities, the way our faces aren’t the same as anyone else’s, the originality of our company?

One point of Ugresic’s *Baba Yaga* is that all of this sexism and ageism and ism-ing in general is a way to deflect the real power of real human beings, to subordinate it to a perverse social order. A good old-fashioned witch hunt, which is something the brilliant and scary Ugresic knows plenty about. (Her anti-nationalist work got her classified as a traitor in her native Croatia. It is not an accident that Dr. Aba Bagay refers to Baba Yaga as a “dissident.”) Maybe she is a little bit warm and fuzzy, after all? I think of her bravery and feel tender.

I also think about the difference between a witches and women. In babayagology, pretty much any middle-aged or old woman could be a witch, with sagging breasts and whiskers. But, as Pierre de Lancre noted in 1622, around the time of a spate of demonic possessions and obsessions amongst the ladies of France, “’Tis a fairy tale to say all witches be old.” A witch is a woman who is old or young, who is a real, authentic woman or secretly not one (instead a hermaphrodite, or a demon), who is ugly or beautiful or both, who is invisible or who appears. The thing they all have in common is power -- the power of creation, and destruction. The power of metamorphosis. The power to exist, or die. Some of them (like Pupa, the gynecologist in Ugresic’s book) are herbalists, doctors, midwives, or healers. Others create beings out of their own bodies (see p. 31 for an unforgettable spin on this). Some of them must be artists or writers.

In Clarice Lispector’s masterpiece *The Passion According to G.H.*, the protagonist has a keen awareness of social taxonomy, of how she’s been classified or confined. It is the explosion of this taxonomy, the transformation into a being beyond categories, into a world past lumping and splitting, and certainly past age (“Life is so continuous that we divide it into stages and call one of them death.”), that connects her to the divine. Meaning, to Hell. G.H. is a sculptor (“[Sculpting] gave me a past and a present that allowed others to situate me... For a woman, that reputation is a great thing socially and it has located me, as much for myself as for others, in an area between man and woman, socially speaking. Which left me much freer to be a woman, since I was making no formal effort to be one.”), but Lispector was a writer. A creator, or destroyer. The maker not only of that character, but of her entire world, of the totality of her journey, and our journey as readers.

“Suddenly that whole world that was me was contracting from exhaustion, I couldn’t stand carrying it on my shoulders any longer... it, what? and I gave into a tension that had always been there but I didn’t know it. At that time there were beginning to take place in -- and I still didn’t know it -- the first signs of the collapse of subterranean limestone caves that were falling in under the weight of stratified archaeological layers -- and the force of the first collapse lowered the corners of my mouth, made my arms fall. What was happening to me? I shall never be able to understand it, but there must be someone who can. And I shall have to create that someone who can inside myself.” The action centers around G.H. watching a dying cockroach in the room of her former maid, who (she realizes) hated her. She visits a place beyond language, beyond pure experience even.

This creation process, from inside, from outside, is different for people categorized as women than for other kinds of artists. Because of the way we are Baba Yaga-ed, stereotyped, turned into fantasies or hags, expected to take it lying down. I recently read Carol Loeb Schloss’s great biography of Lucia Joyce, James Joyce’s daughter who, like so many other young women who had moved through sexually free modernist Paris (Schloss mentions seven other girls from Lucia’s immediate circle

alone), was confined in mental institutions. Lucia was a talented dancer, and a crucial and transformational moment in the history of dance. She was highly aware of her father constantly observing her, notebook in hand, writing her into his work.

Schloss's thesis is that Lucia and James Joyce were creative collaborators: "It was as if Lucia began to perform the events of her life in order to evoke a metamorphosis of herself into Joyce's text... There were two artists in this psychic space, and they were mutually enthralled... The dancing body of the daughter had been expropriated by language by this time in personal history; the tangible, Dionysian project of a talented and original young woman had been judged, by those in her father's circle, to be of lesser importance than the Apollonian mind of the father... She had made herself into the creature of her own and her father's imagination... She was a flesh-and-blood child who made the outrageous claim that she, a girl, wanted to be an artist. It took every breath of Lucia's life to make the point. It took every breath of her father's life to get the story right." Carl Jung, who analyzed Lucia, said that the father and daughter were two people heading toward the bottom of a river, only he was diving and she was falling. Jung was un-fond of Joyce's work ("One should never rub the reader's nose in his own stupidity"), and made little headway with Lucia. You can see Lucia's talent and charisma from the pictures of her dancing, in eerie costumes of her own creation. She was widely considered clairvoyant, at a time when clairvoyance was a popular salon topic. Her name meant "light."

The key here is the acknowledgement that creation exists in a "psychic space." This is where art becomes witchcraft. Whether artists practice a personal glamour (ala Anais Nin: "What does the world need, the illusion I give in life, or the truth I give in writing"), or mysticism (ala Lispector's *Passion*), or uprising (ala Ugresic's *Baba Yaga*), they're doing something that exists outside of their long confinement in categories and stereotypes. Baba Yaga-the-stereotype, unreclaimed, is "a loser... The chief reason for Baba Yaga's heresy is her great age. Her dissidence only takes place within the system of life-values that we ourselves have made; in other words, we forced her into heresy. Baba Yaga does not *live* her life; she *undergoes* it. She is an old maid or a virgin, who serves as a screen for the projection of (castrating) male and (self-punishing) female fantasies. We have stripped away the mere possibility of accomplishment on any level and left her with nothing but a few tricks to scare little children with... Baba Yaga is a surrogate-woman, she is here to get old instead of us, to be old instead of us, to be punished instead of us. Hers is the drama of old age, hers the story of excommunication, forced expulsion, invisibility, brutal marginalization. On this point, our own fear acts like acid, which dissolves actual human dramas into grotesque clownishness."

But what happens when the real Baba Yaga emerges, her true self reclaimed, acting on the psychic space of the world? That's when the *story* begins. Not a lazy folktale, but the dazzlingly mean work of a great writer. "It seems, dear editor, that the moment has come for us to part," writes Dr. Aba Bagay, her dangerous real name still

hiding in its anagram. “I hope the sudden change of tone won’t confuse you: we have sped through several thousand signs together; we have pecked at the grains of language, side by side; they say that reading should be interactive, just like making love... You were given an overdose, I know... you felt cramped, and more cramped, until you almost couldn’t breathe. In a well-made text, the reader should feel like a mouse in cheese. And that’s not how you felt at all, is it?”

She tells a story of a shepherd and a snake-emperor spitting in each other’s mouths three times, so that then the shepherd understood “speechless language, the language of animals and plants.” It reminds me of G.H., looking into the flat eyes of that cockroach. At the end of *The Passion*, G.H. tastes that cockroach, puts it to her mouth, puts her mouth to it. She wants to go as low as she can. (“Hell is my maximum,” thinks G.H. “And Hell is not the torture of pain! it is the torture of a certain joy.”)

“(I)f we were to truly understand each other,” writes Dr. Aba Bagay, “speaker and listener, writer and reader, you and I, we would have had to spit into each other’s mouths, entwining our tongues and mixing our spittle. You and I, editor, we speak different languages: yours is only human, whereas mine is both human and serpentine. Are you frowning now? Thanks a lot, you’re thinking, it’s too much already... Farewell, my dear editor! Soon I shall change my human language for a bird’s. Only a few more human moments remain to me, then my mouth will stretch into a beak, my fingers will morph into claws, my skin will sprout a covering of glossy black feathers.”

After this it seems like Baba Yaga is everywhere -- in Nina Cassian’s incredible poem “I Left Those Walls” (“I am a nightmare-bird now/ everyone hears the beating of my wings,/ nobody recognizes me,”), in almost-forgotten tales of other witches, on the streets. After all, writes Dr. Aba in a section headed ‘Baba Yagas of the World, Unite!’: “Baba Yaga is a ‘dissident,’ excommunicated, reclusive, an eyesore, a failure, but she is neither alone nor lonely... she has innumerable sisters.” What if they *did* all unite? Scary!

“Only in ancient mythical zones is a woman’s power of flight unlimited,” she writes, and if artwork isn’t an ancient mythical zone, I don’t know what is. Maybe you’re diving there on purpose. Maybe you’re drowning. Maybe you’re flying, in wings that you made, and then drowning anyway, like Daedalus’s child. It’s in that psychic space that we are ageless, at our maximum. Hell, I guess you might call it, but whose Hell? “There they fly on equal terms with men... In these zones, Baba Yaga herself could fly freely. She flew in her mortar, in her mortar-womb, to be sure, but the thing is, she flew.”