



Dark Lullaby

Tell me a story, she said, or sing me to sleep. Her head sank back on the pillow. Her little finger, missing a ring tonight, curled around my little finger. I looked at her paling alabaster skin, and wondered how long it would be before the warm torrent of her youth drained away. There were no mathematical formula to be relied upon. Some lasted for many nights, for others the final dissolution came within the first hour. So disappointing - the passage of time in itself means so little to me, yet the longing is eternal.

I could not bring myself to sing her some old ballad of Hanka Ordonowa. So, instead, I remembered what was gone and what was lost. I moved closer to her in the moonlight, brushing my lips against her cheek, and whispered to her, only to her, in words ancient and constant... Everything is changing, my sweet.

Some say the cause of this is a silver ship that sails each night far across the universe. In truth, only the hull is dipped into this lustrous metal, giving it a polished and mirror-like appearance. As it traverses no known seas, across the dark skies it leaves behind a shimmering trail of phosphorescence. So beautiful. So alluring. And so some watchers mistake it for a distant comet. Yet it is no comet, its form is more familiar and earthbound, made of wood and metal, pitch and tar. Look closer, my love, at the peculiar markings on the mast and calligraphic scrawls across the deck. Be assured that, in almost all aspects, it may be like any other ravishing schooner that once sailed from the Cape to Madagascar. As for the crew, what can I tell you of them? You can see they are mere children, thin as paper. Despite this, they tighten the jib with dexterity and climb the rigging with no trepidation. They expertly set the mainsails to catch the zephyr-breeze, their small hands tie the figure of eight knots and turn the wheel with an ease born of long familiarity.

Some say these very souls are the last survivors of the Children's Crusade. Can you remember the story? It was not so long ago, in 1213, when thousands of boys and

girls travelled from all over Europe, inspired by a vision of such clarity and power that they joined together to journey to the Holy Land. They believed, they truly believed, that they would wrest it from the Muslims with the strength of their love rather than by force. Love crosses centuries, does it not? As does anguish.

There was one boy, Nicholas of Cologne by name, who gathered 20,000 to his cause. Together they crossed the Alps, losing many to starvation and sickness en route, and only a few remnants of this foolhardy pilgrimage reached the port at Genoa. These ragged few found no ships willing to take them further and many jeering crowds to test their faith. Another 30,000 followed Stephen, a mere shepherd boy from the Vendome, to the town of Marseilles. He claimed the sea would part so they would be able to simply walk to Jerusalem. When it did not, duplicitous merchants promised them passage and sent them without care to ravenous potentates in Africa. Instead of love or salvation, the fates decreed that these poor children met with an early death - or if they were less fortunate, then shipwreck, capture, rape, slavery.

That's what they say.

You stir with a little shiver, sombulant and weakening. I move inside you slowly and inexorably, so much better to feast upon all that you feel. Oh how you palpitate, my adored one. It is hard to concentrate but I continue, I cannot stop at this late juncture. Fare thee well, I say, knowing that all that exists for you now is my voice, an unravelling thread as you fall into the depths. And so I tell you of those primitive times when people believed that bodies drowned in a river could be found by setting afloat a votive candle on a piece of wood and observing where it stopped or went out. In this terrible last century, I have heard others say countless times 'better to light a candle than curse the darkness', but in the darkness lies power, the space where all matter is formed and shaped. You will know this to be truth, soon.

My treasure, I myself cannot say for certain who these children once were, but I can tell you that these souls are too fearless and proud to be found by lighting a candle. After whatever floods and fires and storms they have endured they are now becalmed, open and pure, becoming the sum of all possibilities. There is a new story to be inscribed on their bodies. They are so unlike the children you may know of, fixed to home and hearth. They are inexhaustible in their task. For each and every night this silver vessel visits a new port seeking fresh voyagers - its berth is illimitable and yet it hungers to be filled to the brim.

As for the Captain of this strange ship? Death, some say that is the name she chooses to be known by. She swaggers across the quarter deck with unsatiated fury. Some say it is none other than the long suffering soul of Grace O'Malley, once the Sea Queen of Connemara. Whoever commands, the crew of this precious vessel journey far from the known boundaries of the world; they will know the cold fire of Orion and the ice frosted tang of the Pleiades. Their voyage will last until the end of time.

Some believe that, at very centre of this particular world, you will find a tree of life, whose roots touch the underworld, whose branches reach up to heaven. And the bowels of this particular ship are perhaps hewn from the ancient wood of this particular tree. Beneath the tree, three springs rise - one of which is the source of all

earthly rivers, one of which gives great wisdom to all who drink from it, one of which fills the Well of Fate. It might be said that its very sap will nourish all memory and experience. In this way, the tree is not unlike the DNA and RNA that shapes mortals from the moment of conception and each succeeding generation. The silver ship sets forth to navigate these immense currents. Forever and ever, amen.

Others believe that Death is just a door. *Knock! Knock! Who's there?* All living things pass through, the willing and unwilling, each of you a shooting star, magnificent in the firmament. Some believe on the other side of the door is a glorious garden. Some believe you will find another world not unlike this one, for there are many lives to be lived and experiences to store. More doors and yet more questions. Are we near the door? And shall we dare to enter? Ah, we must, we must...

Your skin is so cold, your lips still ruby red. For a moment, I almost falter. Some can be turned, of course, and why not this one? The temptation is great, but most are destined to become mere bagatelles, dreary companions of the lowest sort, for the spirit – their very essence captured in the flesh – rarely crosses over. The beautiful and the damned, two entirely different races, my dearest. They soon become savage, spiteful and so unbearably dull, hungering for the life they no longer have, unable to adapt and survive. These misshapen creatures of the night, gibbering entities - easily confused, unintelligible and uncontrollable - are quickly led to the slaughter, offered as victims for the occasional hunters of dangerous game. (Yes, there are some.) Oh my love, I would not want this for you.

I am reminded of the Ancient Greek vision of Hades, all mist and gloom, where those zestless and vapid creatures bemoan their lack of life; literally life-less, once the ferryman has taken them across the Styx. Your lifespan, so brief, so intense – a magnificent burst of a flame in the long aeons of immense darkness. The passion within your blood, which drew me relentlessly towards you, cannot be contained, kept or immortalised. At least, I do not wish to take the chance and condemn you to a second ending.

My voice is so much lower now, hovering on the edge of her consciousness. In a whisper that a cat could not hear, I say to her, No-one knows Death, at least not personally. There is no need to be immobilised by fright or horror. For you, it is as natural a process to die as it is to be born, yet you think of Death as some kind of surprise, like an uninvited guest at the ball, even though you know it's *there*, always waiting so patiently.

My hands gently caress her hair and I resolve to sever a sweet lock for remembrance. A part of my being, deep within, issues an admonishment, for it is true I have become sentimental for this one. Do not let the daylight in, says this primeval inner voice. I run the tip of my forefinger over her quivering lower lip. Sleep now, I say out loud, sleep now in my gentle and tender embrace. Before the dawn, the silver ship will be here.