



Dmitry Nikiforovich Martynov,
'The Sorceress of Endor', detail of
'The Shade of Samuel Invoked by Saul' (1857).

Ba'lat Ov from *The Jewish Book Of Horror*

Brenda Tolian

In the night, the spirits spoke with hisses and gurgles like serpents wrapped around my head. I awoke covered in sweat, barely able to breathe, afraid of what they would ask me to do. They whispered things over and over, crying out for understanding. There was never a choice in my action, only the act itself or madness.

The gift of the Eshet Ba'lat Ov was taboo, but if not sent by Elohim, then who? What other power could overtake a child in such a way? My grandmother said it was the power from Asherah, the Lady of the Serpent. She told me this, forbidding me from saying the name out loud. Women were killed for less, and for us, death came slowly behind brick or below the soil.

We were the Ba'lat Ov of Endor, not magicians or conjurers but unwitting necromancers with an ancient connection to the dead. The spirits came pressing into our dreams at night with leathery bodies and wet tongues speaking terrible truths mixed with lies. Through learning and practice we understood discernment, but this took many years.

Sometimes the spirits of the dead kept us plunged deep in Sheol, neglecting our physical bodies. Eventually we would awake starved, crawling with insects, our mouths full of their gifts – loose, tiny, childlike teeth and stones. It was always the same. When we reached for nourishment – a bit of bread, a mouth full of water – they might leave us to recover, sensing, I suppose, our uselessness in death. But they did not leave us for long, descending once more, filling our mouths until we opened our bodies wide, allowing them to push into us. The visions and words flowed like a river of thought, disjointed and disturbing. Sometimes the meaning escaped us, and the spirits grew irritable and angry. Other times, they touched our minds like feathers.

If ignored, they flooded our mouths with stones, teeth, or berries, symbolising their intruding thoughts and displeasure. We could not deny them when they did this, or they would replicate the objects until we choked. I have only observed it once in a child who did not know her gift. She was found with her purple cheeks stuffed, bumpy with stones, while berries oozed down her chin mixed with blood. The child did not know how to open herself.

We had no choice but to obey.

I remained a pure oracle untouched by man, only invaded by spirits, a conduit of the unseen. We could copulate with men, as we chose, but only to produce the next daughter. If sons were created, the spirits would come at night and slip into our bellies. They would

feed there for many days, ripping apart the child with tiny sharp teeth until only blood poured out of the womb. The woman would share in the agony, our spirit in direct union with our young. This was the reason there were so few of us. We did not want to chance the sorrow of growing a son.

I lived with many rules of purity. The laws of the Ba'lat Ov were not so different from any oracle. Our body is treated as a sacred space; we relied on the people seeking our power to provide. The people of Endor would climb to this cave bringing food and essentials in trade for words from the dead. They also brought news, especially of the king's men who hunted the Ba'lat Ov by command of Elohim.

I was blessed to have a teacher in my grandmother even after the day that the threat of death silenced our kind. The king did not understand that the gift could not be silenced or stopped. We did not call it down by dark means; it was imbued at conception, a heritage that could not be refused.

Though we hid far above the towns we served, they still hunted us to near-extinction. My grandmother took us deep into the highlands, continuing my education, but the king's men were jackals on a blood trail. She knew they would eventually find us.

On that last day, I watched hidden as they shut my grandmother behind brick and rock. The men sat in grim vigil until her scratching and screaming ceased. After they left, I waited, frightened to approach our empty and tomblike home. I tried pulling the bricks down, but one layer revealed another. I sat for many days as the spirits spoke of her death, slowly cut off from the light, then air.

Beyond that wall I could not hear my grandmother; though I slept beside it for many days. For two years, the spirits remained quiet as if they also feared the command of the king. I lived feral in my grief and the silence of lost connection.

Until the night the spirits returned.

In my dreams, I heard the first whispers beyond the wall, the sound crossing between the worlds. I listened to her voice, angry and harsh within the sudden whirlwind of the insect-like voices of the spirits. I awoke, my mouth forced open with gravel and berries, and I jammed my fingers behind the gritty mixture, pushing them out to fill my lungs with air. Beyond, the voice filtered from the wall in its terrible words. I recognised that voice deep in my bones – I knew.

My dreams continued for many days, vivid – awash in meat and blood. Men screaming as a horde of bronze locusts washed over them with no end. This horde of thousands moved in iridescent swarms that entered every fleshly opening, funnelling into nose, mouth, eyes, and nether regions. I heard clicking mandibles chewing through the bodies of men, mouths so full of insects that they couldn't scream. The men tore their clothing and skin in agony, crawling toward me, grasping the hem of my robe. The terrible cacophony merged with my mouth, screaming my eyes open.

My body curled beside the cool bricks, my breath the only sound after the terrible din of the dream, I closed my eyes, enjoying the quiet that blanketed my mind, seeking another sound altogether. I waited until I heard the scratching of nails, a terrible sound, yet a promise that she was here with me.

Sometimes during the day, the spirits would come pushing into the corners of my mind.

'He will come, and you will tell,' they hissed, rolling a stone into my mouth.

Clutching my head, I asked, 'Who will come?'

'He will come, and another will come through,' they whispered, adding a berry with another stone.

'What shall I do?' I pleaded, digging fingers into my temples, seeking to dull the pain. I spat stones and juice, trying hard not to swallow.

'You will feed him,' they laughed before vacating.

I saw the king three days later down in the valley, long before he found my cave. I watched the dusty caravan creeping closer. Servants darted out to explore the many caverns below, looking for the Ba'lat Ov. The spirits were strangely hushed with their coming.

When I was ready, I left the cave and climbed the high ridge. I felt the heavy presence of the spirits around me, but they hovered just out of reach.

I started a fire, feeding it wood until it could be easily seen by those below. I wanted the man to know I expected him. I walked barefoot to the edge, my eyes sweeping the dun earth. The Hill of Moreh fell away to my left and Mount Tabor to my right. I stood in a nameless place high above the remnants of the former city of Endor, cupped within the Jezreel Valley.

The caravan paused, and a man rode to the front. I could not see who he was, but my mouth filled with small stones like smooth teeth. I knew he was the one the spirits spoke of. I turned the stones with my tongue, retreating to the fire, spitting them into the flames.

'I won't deny you,' I whispered, not knowing if I spoke to the spirits or the man.

I watched the man consult with his armoured column, the metal shining under the dwindling sunlight. Thousands of lights flickered in the valley to the southwest, a vast army waiting for battle. Alone, he rode to the ridge base, glancing up, perhaps noting the smoke of my fire.

All around, the air circulated in ropes of warmth and ice. Hushed whispers flowed, ancient voices in singsong. Their words were dark and terrible, melting my knees and making my hands tremble. He approached on foot, forced to leave his animal before the steep climb to the heights, where I watched. There was pride in his countenance, a nobility that suggested he was someone of importance. He grasped the rock with sure hands, his hair a dark frame around his face when he looked upwards. The face he showed was aged but handsome, though I did not know him. I watched him climb antlike as the spirits shuddered around me.

His face was pained as he pulled himself over the lip of rock and sat resting, watching me with careful eyes. I walked around to the furthest side of the fire, waiting for him to catch his breath. Stars began flickering in the sky above, even as the horizon burned orange.

His eyes tracked the long incline he had climbed to reach me, and with weary movements he stood, slowly approaching the fire. His dark eyes rested on me, and he gasped, realising that my eyes glimmered gold, a hereditary mark of the spirits. He opened his mouth to speak and then closed it. I didn't know who he was, but I knew he was unaccustomed to fear.

'You seem shocked that you stand in the presence of the Ba'lat Ov? This is strange since you decided in your heart to find me,' I said quietly.

He swallowed, stepping closer to the fire. 'I am told you have a talisman to speak to the dead.' The spirits rumbled awake at his voice, dipping from the cool air and flowing into my mouth. I tongued berries and swallowed, stepping closer to the fire.

A woman's voice wailed from the depths of the cave behind. The man froze, glancing into the cavern as I shivered with understanding.

'Did you hear that?' he asked.

I nodded towards the cave. 'Voices of the dead. They are close tonight.' The man bit his lip and looked down, unable to meet my eyes. Whatever fear he felt in this place, of me – of her who moaned beyond the wall, he did not show. There was a resignation in his eyes and frame that spoke of a need that superseded terror.

'Have you come to trick me?' I asked.

I pushed the hair from my face, waiting. The man crossed his arms and walked around the fire towards me.

I threw out a hand in warning. 'Do not come closer.'

'No harm will come to you. I need a necromancer to call upon a friend only.'

'It is against the law of the king to ask. It is death to reveal a Ba'lat Ov.'

'No harm will come,' he insisted.

I smiled then, feeling how close to the truth I stood. I wanted to push him, make him say it aloud. 'Who are you to claim such power?'

'I am a king.'

I laughed, curling my arms across my belly.

'A king would not lower himself to approach a Ba'lat Ov.'

'Elohim turns his back to me,' he spat, his eyes alight with anger. 'I cannot sink any lower.'

'So you seek to speak with the dead?'

He nodded, his shoulders dropping in shame.

'Who, then, do you seek?'

'Samuel.'

I shivered. 'Samuel, the dead prophet, speaker of spirits blessed by Elohim?'

'I need his instruction, as he gave me while living,' the man begged.

I could feel the danger in this request. 'A prophet resting will curse us.'

'Please,' the king whispered. 'I need the talisman of the Ba'lat Ov. Where is it?'

I walked around the fire. The spirits crowded around, looping around my hair, arms, and legs. This is what they had warned me of, prepared for. I did not have a choice.

I stepped closer, reaching my hands to either side of his face. He tried to look away as I stared into his dark eyes.

'I am the talisman,' I said.

I allowed my soul to open, and let my head fall back. The stars above shimmered as the spirits descended through my open mouth. I felt them crawling deep into my chest, allowing them to take up the spaces I opened to them. I felt their tiny teeth biting, slicing bits of my insides. I had never before allowed them to enter me this way, and they tore through me like hungry little ghosts.

My head wrenched forward, struck by the sudden weight of the spirits pressing in. The crowding spirits filled my mouth with teeth, cutting my gums and tongue. Blood dripped down my chin as I struggled to stand upright. Saul clasped my hands, my fingernails digging into his skin. He attempted to step back, his face contorted with horror.

I felt a new, powerful presence pouring in, pushing back the lesser spirits. I hoped it might be my grandmother quitting the cavern and coming to my rescue, but I could hear her screams growing louder from the cave. Invisible hands clutched my body, holding me, stretching my limbs. My neck snapped back, and my vision was crowded with stars that wavered closer and closer.

This spirit, so ... dense, burying itself deeper and deeper, burning like fire. It expanded, racing down my neck and filling my body with heat and anger. I joined with it and felt its murderous rage. It shook within me, awakening.

With blood filling my mouth, it spoke through me, 'King Saul, why do you wake me from my sleep?'

Saul stumbled, falling to his knees in front of me.

'Samuel – please,' Saul begged on his knees, arms out in supplication. 'Elohim has abandoned me.'

The voice exploded out of my chest, 'Elohim has turned away from you. Your seed, your reign, your kingdom are at an end.'

Saul crumbled, his chin bowed low to the ground, sobbing.

The spirit forced my hand to close, my fingers gesturing downward. 'The Philistines are at your feet, even now! Look down into the thousands of lights that glow in the Jezreel Valley.'

Saul turned his head slowly. He gasped, gulping breaths of air.

'David will take your place,' the voice thundered.

The thing within me looked down on the crumpled form of the king. I felt its disgust seething within my bones.

Suddenly, the presence pulled out of my body. Hot pain filled me, grabbing my organs and ripping them towards my mouth. I screamed, folding to the ground beside Saul, the presence punching holes in my soul. It had cut open the places I tried to keep closed off from the lesser spirits. My vision darkened as I flew inward. In the shadows, I saw armies meeting. Swords swung as heads rolled from necks, spraying blood. I saw the king's sons die as I flew like a bird above the desperate battle. Below I saw Saul and swooped closer. He was standing on Mount Gilboa only a little way from the corpses of his three sons. The king begged his armour-bearer to kill him as he ripped an arrow from his side. He wept like a child, his agony corrupting his strong body.

He reached out, holding his sword aloft, his arm shaking.

The spirits whispered in my ear; 'He blames you.'

The armour-bearer shook his head, refusing the sword of his king.

The king cried out, looking out into the field of battle, his armies ground into the blood-churned earth. He lowered his hand and let the blade of the sword slide through his fingers. The hilt he twisted into the ground, the long blade pointing skyward. Then, hesitating, he looked up, and his eyes fixed on mine. I did not see blame there, only guilt in his eyes and flexed jaw.

Saul extended his arms outward and fell, slamming his chest on the blade, pushing down until the tip bit through his back, slicing through until his face was in the dirt. His body rolled to the side, pulling the sword from the dirt. Reflexively, his body contorted as his spirit uncoiled itself from the flesh.

I felt my spirit pull downward until I crouched beside his head. I dug my fingers into his long hair. The king begged to die in a soundless whisper.

The servant screamed at me but didn't approach. Saul's mouth opened, his tongue rolling out as his spirit fled. I leaned down, touching my lips to his mouth. I opened, and my teeth merged with the spirits, biting down until I felt the tongue slicing away. I jerked my head back, pulling with my teeth until the fleshy bits tore. I chewed the salty taste of his tongue, still warm, and swallowed. I felt the rough flesh going down, filling my belly.

I fell back into darkness, the vision smoky and swirling. I felt the spirits siphon through my mouth, spooling upwards like a pillar.

I slept.

My eyes startled open, my belly aching with hunger. The king watched me from his seat beside the fire as I tried to sit up. His eyes, red from tears, flicked from my face to the lights in the valley. When he looked at me again, I saw the haunted look of death's shadow. I knew that the time and place were near and that Elohim would not lend a hand in peace.

'There is no forgiveness,' he said.

I shook my head. I could see, but he was still blind.

The visions dissipated, and I wondered if I spoke for Elohim, Asherah or my grandmother. 'Let me feed you, my lord.'

He did not respond but sat despondently by the glowing embers.

I listened to the spirits whisper around me. I followed them to the cave. The voice of my grandmother now gurgled beyond the wall.

'Feed him,' they intoned.

I mixed flour and water. I kneaded the mixture, adding the spirit berries as they rolled into my mouth. The dough became stained red from the juices, looking more like flesh than grain.

I rolled this into a ball and carried it and a skin of water back to the fire. Saul did not look up as I busied myself adding kindling. Nor did he move as smoke coiled in his direction as I blew across the embers until flames danced once more. Saul's eyes were locked on the lights down in the valley.

I offered him the water, but he refused.

I flattened the dough with my palms and placed it on a hot rock to cook – the smell of cooking bread mixed with the coppery-sweet smell of the berries. Carefully I turned the bread until it was goldening.

After a while, he turned to the smell of the cooking bread.

'What magic was that?' he demanded.

'Magic is only magic when it comes from the mouth of a woman. It is our labour – the labour of the Ba'lat Ov. You promised no harm,' I said, turning the unleavened bread over slowly.

'What else did you see? You left with him.'

'There are things no man should know.'

I pinched the hot flatbread between my fingers, folding it. I placed it before him.

'Eat, my lord. A small peace.'

Saul held the bread up in his hands. He did not pray. He did not thank the maker as he ate.

I looked on as stones rolled onto my tongue, tiny fingers caressing my skin, whispering in ethereal communication. The voice of my grandmother softened into a song that threaded into the web that holds the world.

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