

Hansel and Gretel, lithograph
(Wellcome Collection 27386i).



Hansel and Gretel Retold

Kristin Camitta Zimet

I. Hansel

The first time, I dropped my hard remarks
like pocket stones – just far enough apart
I still could sneak back to the door and find it
off the latch; though I'd as soon have tipped
the mountaintop, crushing the cottage
like a mouldy loaf, both of them in it:
my father; stiff and stale; that woman,
slick as flour; tear-salty, floundering in sugar.
Women – they want to squeeze you into shape,
poke and decorate you. Even my dough-faced
sister will swell up into a woman – ugh!
Witches, the lot of them, keeping you cooped
and coddled, then sidling up familiar as cats,
the merest rub making you smother-hot,
your body steaming like unseasoned wood,
your hands all blunder. No trusting in them.
Dream – and they flutter pecking at your hand.
Wake reaching – they dissolve, crumbs
on a dirt floor. Or die. Nights I lie awake,
a spring of bitter cold seeps out of me
into a white lake numbing my heart,
my tongue. Next time she tries to touch
even my little finger; not one word. Only
I'll hiss like red iron in the blacksmith's
bucket. Then axe-hard, I'll clear out.

II. Gretel

I'm getting used to hunger.
Getting light as the white bird
who flits at the edge of my dreams,
a wisp of milky fog between trees.
Like icing your tongue just misses
at the corner of your mouth.
It's easier, now Papa brushes me
off his lap like stale crumbs.
If Hans tosses a sugared word,
he's just teasing a squirrel
into slingshot range.
My Mama's faded calico –
almost my size – lumbers
around the house, split by that
big woman, bosom overstuffed
like dough so long rising, it crusts
and sags over the bowl's edge.
When she looms over me,
ladling stew, I hear it seethe,
her flesh, creeping out like yeast.

It smothers appetite. I have to eat
because of Papa's fist; I've had to
swallow everything since Mama
lay down, a white stone. I just
undo it out-of-doors. Though once
juicy afternoons ran down my chin.
I tottered home, heavy. She was there,
a steamy kettle on the hob for us,
and cream in heart's-ease tea.
Now my basket floats. I flutter
on the path, toes barely touching
down. I bring back blueberries
shrivelled up, gooseberries
prickly-sour, false strawberries,
gritty with dust. The white bird
promises, soon I'll blow away,
shiny milkweed on my Mama's breath.

III. The Woodcutter

"It's not for the cut wood to cry out,"
the old priest scolded, when I dragged
myself to him, my soul smashed to kindling.
"He strides the woods; He sets His axe
to any trunk. Praise Him, and do not dare
hold back His hand." (I saw Him then,
whose roaring appetite gobbles us up
just as the manor squanders wood –
my own green boy, my stick-tight girl
good as gone; and any baby I might
ever make would come out bawling
and red-hot, because it saw Him too ...)

"But Father, you know my wife was
just a sapling beech; when she swayed,
sunlight shook down from the canopy,
sweetening shade. Children grew
around her; green and full.
So slight a tree to leave so deep a gap.
He might have spared ..."

The old priest flashed a chipped tooth.
"He's only made a clearing. Praise Him,
son, the woods are full of women.
Find you one, I'll wager you will sprout
as stout as ever. There's one, now,
the baker's big girl, blubbers for you –
she's a spicy one – I'll fix it up."

(I felt Him, lopping, then,
whacking off branches that I might
grow back, grow thick with longing,
time and again, more spindly, more
readily bent. Saw how He makes us,
so half-hewn, the heart goes on
labouring stubborn at the chopping block
till there is nothing more that He
can take. Saw every path in Eden
pushing us toward the Tree, the trap
baited with sweet, and sprung.)

I snapped her up, the baker's girl:
His will be done. I chop the days,
haul them away to sell, to burn.
I hear His axe, shadowing,
blow for blow. He's coming
back. But praise Him for it?
Sooner I'll be damned.

IV. The Stepmother

For all his greenwood looks, the breezy sway
of oaken limbs that always turned my head,
let it be told: that he was lightning-struck,
charred top to bottom, once she died.
That his hands hung limp after a day's chopping.
That he sat stump-still at a cold hearth,
memories sprouting like fungus, eating him soft,
crawling like beetles up under the bark.

And the children, wood-sprites – tell it right –
grew brambly: he a dark wolf; she a white mouse
scuttling into the brush, tied to his shadow.
If I would pour them milk, they'd drop the jug.
If I would bake, they'd roll the crumbled loaves
into white pebbles on their plates.
Suppertime, the sawdust air could choke.
I spun them sugar, once:
they snatched, dropped it smack down again.
It burnt their skinny fingers, don't you know,
to take from me, wrapped in her patched-up gown.

She was a witch, you see, a thorny vine
up from the grave to strangle all my chances.
But send them off, sudden I'd feel the sun
pouring down honey on the thatch.
I'd reel, as if – my senses tangled up
in trees for years, gloom of trees, groan of trees –
I'd stumbled on a clearing.
So when the gypsy peddler came, what if he was
knotted, a gnome? Let the tale-bearers say:
spicy as gingerbread, his manhood rose for me;
his currant eyes shone hot.
He crooked his arms of cinnamon, and rolled me up
easy into his pack.

No matter if you said all of that wood
blossomed with sticky children, gumdrop-sweet,
and all the boughs were looped with pearls and gold.
I am not going back.

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