

THE BRIDES

by Harry Kondoleon

Once upon a time
And because there is no way to tell this story without stopping to cry
We will interrupt ourselves many times and jump from one end of the tale to the other.
Once upon a time

A NORMAL BRIDE SPEAKING

Often I went to parties and couldn't socialize. I didn't know how to smile or even hello. I was normal and felt out of it. Dates became impossible. I spent too much time alone and soon lost respect for myself. I waited.

Then came transformation.

I met a groom and the groom showed me how to walk in love (because love is the gift of the groom) and talk in love (this is the language I had never spoken before) and sleep in love (the groom shook me awake from the dreamless sleep of my life).

But my story is one of betrayal for my groom took a lovelier princess outside of the city and together they went into the forest and wed never to be heard of again.

PITY THE BRIDE

Her tears made a kind of swimming pool near the gates of the palace
And those to whom the broken heart was a mystery came there to swim when the weather got warm

And they pointed to her shadow dragging behind the trees,

"There's the unwed bride -- pity her and move on."

Pity her and move on -- they made a folk song and sang it in taverns over beer and whiskey,
Pity her and move on -- scrawled on the whitewashed outhouses and the magistrate's office.

That there was to be no pleasure, no happiness for me I accepted years ago. I sat as a child with that fact in my lap and I lumped it with the other stuffed things children hold to distract themselves.

When I complained to friends of my loneliness and unwillingness to settle for the scraps that fell from their own celebrations, they hugged me (the way you hug something repugnant which you have grown used to and taught yourself to believe is not repugnant but nevertheless hold back from and yes even flinch and wince) -- with this hug I receive the love of friends, the charitable taking away and taking away and taking away.

I will devote myself to the groom, I said to myself,
And I will spend the long hours of his absence
Writing poems to him.
He will become jealous of the poems I write

And I will stop writing poems and make us dinner.
But he will say I am too fat

("You're too fat!")

And I will stop eating
And grow thin as a stem, blooming at the neck,
In love with the groom.
But he will say that I have grown too thin

("You're too thin!")

That I look like a string bean

("You look like a string bean!")

And I will eat rapidly, eat to gain
And diet to lose

("Gain!
Lose!
Gain!
Lose!")

Again:
You said I was too big in the places I should be small
And too small in the places I should be big
So I made my big places small
And my small places big
And still you did not love me.

You said my voice was too high and irritated your rest.
I dropped my voice and spoke low and slow
And you said you couldn't hear me
That what you heard sounded false
And that I was wearing a mask.
When I told you that my mask was what kept me from falling apart at your feet
You said that while I was down there I could shine your shoes.

During the sex act there is a moment -- some moments -- brief and ecstatic -- of
unconsciousness. It is this unconsciousness I wish for in every moment of the day.

I can't come for you anymore
I did come once many times
I kept coming
I came so much so often and so far for you
I can't ever get back to where I started from
Now I want you to come claim the things you robbed
My tongue --cut it off -- use that scissor, your mouth
My eyes, lips, arms, legs -- all twin things of the body -- chop them out and off -- get rid of them
Next time before you go -- before you leave the room without evidence, traces or clues -- the
 weapon in your own pocket -- leave some scrap of me behind -- some small scrap for the
 dogs and cats,
They like to sniff at things that have sunk this low.

THE VISITATION OF THE TWO HEADED BRIDE

I was not always like this: mean and evil
The one pointing out the bad side of things
Once
I was beautiful
And sat on a windowsill
Looking out towards apple trees
Counting the ways
Wishing on a star
Mapping my own possibilities.

Something happened to me.

After that I began to see things as
Sour and unhappy.
I became ironic

And spoke as if all the things that were wounding me were amusing me,
Where I wasn't invited to parties I was suddenly invited to parties.
Where I was not spoken to or sought for advice and comfort
 I became a new source of advice and comfort,
Where I was hideous and uncourtable
 I became the fashionable friend
 to be carried like an expensive watch
 to be held, looked at and sought after
 during times of both crisis and felicitation.
Where I was the scorned, the hairy scorpion,
 the scabby old witch of a German fairy tale,
 I became the pleasing godmother,
 the well of wishes.

CONJURING THE GROOM AND DISROBING THE BRIDE

Be be be be my my my everything everything
Be the wall that keeps me from myself
Be every treachery I am afraid of
Be my father right before I realize what he does with my mother
Be my school teacher who has no life outside the classroom and whose only joy comes from
 putting stars on top of my compositions
Be God before planned obsolescence and before all the sadistic holidays invented for him
Be the sun and the river without particular meaning or sacrifice.

Love you
Love me

Love
You know that deep down in my heart I love you
Fuck love
You know that deep down
Fuck love
You know that

Once upon a time a groom -- that's me! -- came riding on his own horse. Lo! he spotted a fair maiden, her skin a beautiful brown or white or yellow or red or black depending upon what I'm in the mood for that afternoon -- I wear what he -- the groom -- is in the mood for. . . "Oh! fair maiden of multicolored skin, of hair and eyes worthy of the Uffizi, may I stop by this clearing and collect a posy of wild flowers to present to your fair nose?"

"Oh do!" says the bride, already a little wet, a little anxious, already turning the present into the past by mentally describing this happening to her sisters who are less beautiful and stay at home with handicrafts and sketch pads. "Oh do!" says the princess, already sizing up the groom beneath his tight doublet, his tight tunic, his tight tights. Already she is imagining his magic stick, describing it to her sisters who themselves will make quick sketches of the unseen instrument, exaggerating their sister's already exaggerated words. "Oh do!" says the bride, "Oh do! Do!" And the groom picks the sweet things-- baby's breath, bachelor buttons and briar roses. "The scent will knock her out," he thinks to himself, already rather horny himself, already mentally unbuttoning the bride, picturing her high firm tits popping from their bondage into the sunlight, furry stingless bees resting on her tall dark nipples, and, unhooking the fuschia bell -- her skirt -- finding the honey nest, dipping the spoon, getting hungry.

And when the sun is up over the poplars, over the cypresses, over the maple, the short dogwood and the stubby bush of thorn berries, over whatever is handy in the neighborhood -- when it's over that, the bride and groom, their bodies a little damp, a little exhausted, roll away from one another, away from this unhistorical history, away from the morning when everyone feels small and uncouneted and into the afternoon where, unnoticed, completely and utterly unnoticed, noon passed, and already everything has been, has been, has been, has been, the crickets shoveling seeds into cracks they won't see in the winter, birds believing in nothing, abandon their twigs and leave town the first signs of snow.

"Oh love me forever!" moans the bride to the groom. This is agony for her, this sudden second sight -- this seeing the forest for the trees, this unquenched fire in her heart. "Oh love me forever!" screams the bride, already picturing a white dress a tailor with twelve assistants will slave over, already picturing the tiered cake, the guests milling in petal strewn aisles -- already she is picturing all this and -- simultaneously -- at once with the ecstasy of fulfillment -- betrayal -- betrayal betrayal betrayal -- at once -- here -- now with the groom inches from her bare hip -- she sees his disappearance, the broken promise, the imaginary fouled sheets of his new bride -- the Other -- the chamber they will retire to when she --if not restrained by her sisters and her I-told-you-so parents would have thrown herself head first down the stone steps leading to the altar. "Is there no sadder story than mine?" weeps the bride, her voice muffled by her gown, her face buried in veils, "Is there no sadder story than mine? -- tell it to me -- tell it to me!"

And the groom in another city in another place in another clearing with a new sack of sperm and another set of flowers to pull out and wind together, the groom grows mythic, larger, more handsome, not aging but evil, evil, evil.

"Dear God in the heaven of heaven alone with your scratch pad of do-bees and dunces, of goodies and bad-enoughs, put me on the happiness list and relieve me from this feeling of being leftover, warmed up by my own hands searching my own vacancies. Dear God in the heaven of good ideas, good deeds and sporadic miracles: do something here now for this embarrassed woman!"

The bride waits for a response.

Nothing happens.

"God works in slow and mysterious ways," says a twig in the glen.
"God has a pipeline to every prayer," says a kettle on the stove.
"God makes results," says an uncut diamond on a jeweler's felt.
"Pity her and move on," they sing in town, "Pity her and move on."

What happens when God does not happen?
We turn to the devil.
Turn turn turn turn.
"Unhappy person to devil. Come in devil.
Unhappy person to devil. Come in devil.
Do you read me?"

THE DEVIL SPEAKS

"Hello my dear how pretty you look in your funeral gown did your mother sew it for you? I love beautiful dresses fashion is a kind of hobby for me. Don't try to speak I can see the pain you wear it and it strangles you. There is no zipper or buttons and the hem drags on the floor. I know it. You see I am something of a tailor cutting sewing pinning. Let me help you take off the pain may I? Bad luck in love is such a heavy fabric. Don't you think? There! Aren't I helping already? A good girl like you -- why all you need do is forget -- here take my shop assistant. He's small and scrawny but all fine husbands are. Make him your own my dear. I never had a daughter but I like to think a pretty girl like you crying could be. Think of me sometimes."

THE ARRIVAL OF THE TAILOR'S DUMMY

Once upon a time
And because this story needs to be told sideways
As if it weren't happening, as if it were all an excuse to get together and have a good time,
Once upon a time
There was a tailor's dummy, a boy
Obsessed with the bride
And though he was spindly, unworldly and dumb

The bride, already an abstraction herself,
Took home the dummy
And made a home for the two of them
In a straw hut near a waterfall -- la la la la

Once upon a time
And because there is no parable to tell
And no lesson to be learned but what we have to learn from our own brittle footsteps on the wet
streets
And because in the imaginary city of your heart
There are people who look exactly like you --
With your color hair and skin and your voice and hand motions and change of clothes --
And these people can't sleep
They are up all the time, an involuntary vigil
Their eyes like blanched almonds
Staring at nothing
Fumbling with glasses, with keys, with capsules
Fingers tapping at a table in Morse code,
"What is there to see? What is there to see?"
And the answer comes back from the next apartment,
"Nothing. Nothing."
And because there is no custodian in this imaginary city,
no department of sanitation
And the streets smoke and stink
And the breath of the inhabitants is short and unkissable
There is no reason to go out
The citizens live like prisoners, tapping and fumbling
There is no moral

Once upon a time
You dreamt of something great and big
that would seize your life
And that in the present everything was wrong and insulting
you would put up with
Waiting for the great and big
And when you thought it was approaching you --
wavery, incandescent, rich with the promise of happiness
You held your breath and closed your eyes
Grabbing and hugging at your reward, your fulfillment
But in the morning, with the spine of your pillow
ripped open and its cut foam insides clung to the blanket
and scatter rug -- this mess! --
And you realize it was only a

Once upon a time

And because dreams don't figure in a commuter's day
And because even though *The Interpretation of Dreams* is a
landmark bestseller when it's zero o'clock and
you can't sleep there is no book written
that you want to read or can read
And because dreams let you go on
When you shouldn't go on
And because a short story or a playlet with fancy acts
is only real for forty-five minutes
And right now your mother and father are sitting somewhere
thinking about when you were tiny and imagining
that when you laughed and cried that you had a personality
and were not just a baby laughing or crying
And you can't feel closer to them by remembering that baby
anymore than you can get back to a foreign country
by holding a souvenir from the airport.

"Oh where am I!" says the vertigo of the bride, "This play is not about me at all. Every minute the prattle swims further away from the desert island of my tragedy, any minute I am to lose sight of myself and fall away from Medea or Clytemnestra or whoever I'm supposed to be, my white dress striped red with the culprit's blood, my hair frizzed electric with vengeance. What's the aftermath of a great passion? What does a powder room look like with bloodied daggers strewn on the pink linoleum? Who carries the heroine in from her aria? What sleeping pill does she take when the deafening applause rings on decades after the one sold-out performance? How many brides in the imperial and non-imperial countries across the world are watching television tonight trying to forget everything before learning it? How many brides -- or for that matter, grooms -- imagine themselves years later going over the mismanagement of their lives like some kind of store inventory where you discover the employees have been stealing for years?"

Once upon a time
There was a tailor's dummy, a boy
Not much of a date, kind of a lump on a stick
And the bride, fitting this lump on a stick
Into her pain, which by now was purple and green
Took the dummy as her husband
Compensation made the bride grow youthful and lighthearted
And she thanked the devil
Who godfathered her twelve sons who
Much later when they were grown, sewed dresses and waistcoats
In the empty mill down near the waterfall.

And because I can't say goodnight
When I should say goodnight
I stand here in white, a conglomeration of gauze for an imaginary wound
inflicted once upon a time
and the scab picked open perpetually

and forever the same itch, the same irritation
the same cry, the same pus even
And on some imaginary altar in an already
burnt up and pillaged city I am sacrificing
myself, my live heart pumping as if
everything could be relieved by just
repeating something often enough by just
being persistent by just saying it out loud
saying it out loud out loud.

This is the part of the story where my unhappinesses are so great I want to die but I don't want to die because I want to tell this again tomorrow and the next day and then again in some other city and so in this part of the story, because my legs are exhausted from travel and I want to walk no further, I wish to cut my legs off but I don't cut off my legs because at the end of the evening I wish to walk out of here and into the street -- "Then what are these lies you keep telling?" you say to yourself and at this point I become ashamed because I seem to be talking out of both sides of my face and I want to cut out my tongue but I don't cut out my tongue because it will not grow back and I must go on speaking because of what I have to say, what same message of the broken heart, over and over -- indefatigable, monotone -- and to cure everything at this point in the story I should take my two hands (which I have not cut oft) and rip out this red thing in my chest -- rip it out and up.

But then if I followed my impulses
There would be no entertainment
No brides in the bridal chamber
Unescorted, attended by shadows
Mocked probably at country fairs
And used as examples by mothers everywhere.

The show must go on.
The brides sit.

THE TWO HEADED BRIDE EVALUATING THE GROOM

Once I sat on the edge of a bluff and thought all things
eventually crashed between rocks and were lost in the foam.
That the sea was without conscience or pity, I took for granted.
I liked its green-black color and admired its strength.
I was a simple person and could comb my hair for hours
humming one song to myself.
One day a groom appears
Changing the color of everything
Hardening inside the bride
Coming into her plans
Changing sea shells into split level homes
pebbles into driveways full of children

their round faces smudged with ice cream
And the groom panting and pressing his wand in her magic hat
says, "Fuck me! Fuck me wild!"
And the bride in an imaginary sanitized heaven
is hearing, "I love you, love you child!"

Where do the grooms come from?
What farm or palace breeds these tall men?
Legend has it they are all princes
And at age go outside their father's gates
preening and posing
Making posies of the wild things.
And they appear on the scene of a girl's life
Like puberty, not gradual, taking everything over
Changing her utterly
The body speaking the foreign language of the groom
Fitting it
Moving around
Getting hot, cooling off.
A white dress grows out from her waistline
Making a skirt, a brassiere,
A white veil like a purdah.
A bride is complete.

WAITING FOR THE GROOM

A secret little bride who lives in the bride
Right now is riding up and down in an elevator
In the dark apartment building of her childhood
Each landing is a shortcoming
And the suitcases she hastily collected from the hall closet are empty
The dresses she had dreamt of wearing
Are laughing on wooden hangers in New York Paris Rome --
anywhere small beads are sewn into mosaics and shine in the night
Nakedness makes the bride frantic
And without trousseau or change of underwear
She can't help but review her faults:
The pompon ice skates she forgot in a friend's locker
and never retrieved when the relationship broke -- trivia
The blind date who ripped open a sweater
popping the round buttons so they snapped like corn kernels
against the windshield of the car -- trivia
The knee socks which fell to her ankles playing exploration
with her best friend when it was raining
and their loafers made footprints to the master bedroom -- trivia
All these clothes, this memory wardrobe, this unpackable luggage

from an unreturnable voyage.
"Oh me!" says the bride, "What paper boat did I board with my
hand over my eyes, afraid of the brown water, afraid of the
grey fish, the snapping turtles, afraid even of my own
colorless reflection rising out of the water to greet me
with my own inadequacies made clearer, my own indecisions,
my own desperate need for a connection, five fingers for
another hand

In this stinking lake, still bay, or gagged river
Why can't I see myself alone
Completed by my own senses
Why does this shadowy figure follow me
Ahead of me
His featureless face hidden beneath a bridge
His strong arms paddling away from me
Towards the elusive Other
And my feet getting caught in the watery muck of these reeds,
Ladders to my face for mosquitoes
Their slender legs and fine stingers
Investigating my expressions
And drinking blood from me like desert crossers at the mouth of a reservoir
Boo-hoo!
Screams my night owl
Right before I kill him
I have grown sick from poetry
Of my own veilly image
Caught in the solitary confinement of artifice
The slow strangulation of activity
The hullabaloo around a pen
The flurry of notepads
I am taking my sour-faced muse out to the woods
Where I will hack her, hack her to pieces
Maybe then I will live again
Perhaps in a woodshed
Without a mirror or paint for my face
Iconless and not particularly at one with nature."

THE GROOM APPEARS

To be perfect is to be desired by everything at all times everywhere
To want yourself even, radiating self, absorbing others,
Consuming the dull, the unfinished, and serving it back
polished, glowing, touched by inspiration,
by idea, thought, form.
To wake up in the morning and be me
Is not a sin -- it's not even uncomfortable.

To think me vain is to boil jam down to nothing but a fragrance.

It is not unusual that I should think myself
the one steady object in a time of depletion,
in a time of minatures without standards,
goals or achievements.

At night, alone, my body pleases me.

Having it under the sheet completes the concept of me:

Legendary, not criminal but not saintly

Neither blond nor black haired

Of no particular race or beliefs

Without attachments

Potent but childless

Happy but not smiling

Sexual but not insatiable

Smart but opinionless

Groomed but without fashion.

To be the groom

Is always to choose first

To say yes and no from a distance

To push away those who push

To select

To be without competition or critics

To be the first one out the door

To appear suddenly in people's lives

and vanish abruptly as if any damage were inevitable

but negligible as if the broken heart were like

a Greek vase, better broken than whole,

more authentic, more valuable and mysterious.

To be the groom is always to be able to get a good night's sleep

Never to be bothered by footsteps on the stairwell,

rustlings behind the curtains of opened windows,

the unlocked door creaking.

A groom is indestructible

And yet he collects guns and knives

Which he hangs on hooks over his stereo

The turntable forever covered by the same record

Playing over and over

The speakers unforgivable

The needle, cruel and tireless, picking up dust

And even when the groom has left town

The song appears by witchcraft

In shopping malls, waiting rooms and bars everywhere.

A groom is pitiless

As he should be

A groom moves on

As he should.

WHAT DOES THE GROOM WANT FOR HIMSELF
AND HOW DOES HE KEEP HIMSELF FIT AND GOOD LOOKING?

Change change change change
Is the therapy for long life, eternal youth and days without boredom.
Become apathetic and good grooming becomes impossible.
Stay interested in life and it will stay interested in you:
 exercise, massage your scalp, get enough sun, fruit and
 raw vegetables, eggs, fish, red meats and wine.
Avoid bitter things and failures.
Always be clean and neat but never talk about it.
Always be loving and caring but never stick around for it.
Travel, change your name, inherit money, sell stocks, keep real estate,
 train horses.
Be athletic but don't waste your time with sports.
Know the arts but don't flounder the long hours in the dark concocting them
Observe everything from a distance.
Fly lightly, land only for killings,
Fuck feverishly, nap and take cool showers.

WHAT DOES THE TWO HEADED BRIDE SAY AND WHERE DOES SHE COME FROM?

Sometimes alone in a room you say is your own
You cannot sleep.
Small songs with one lyric compose themselves in the night.
They say you are no good and no one will ever love you.
Pills don't help.
A drink makes the singing louder.
Cars passing over the gravel have a destination.
How you envy them
Those hands on the steering wheel
Those feet on the pedals.
An unlit room has one geography
Blackness and imagination.
A two headed bride is born there.
She's not happy.
She shares everything.
Four hands clasp a tiny bouquet.
No waistline can accommodate the hungers of two stomachs.
No aisle is wide enough.
No march will not seem ridiculous.
But a two headed bride sees things
 no one else can.
She can see everything in the world
 for its good and its bad

and appraising it thoroughly
serves it back untouched.
In this way a two headed bride is a connoisseur.
That she cannot fall in love
 be unmindful and laugh in the harbors of picturesque cities –
These things do not bother her.
And if she is tortured privately
 by any deprivations
She carries the weight bravely.
And if poetic men should see the virtue
 of a two headed bride
Or if lesbian hostesses should make the two headed bride
 a guest of honor
Or if the president himself should sit her down
 to high tea in the green room or the red room
 or whatever color room he happens to be in the mood for
If these small rings should fall at the feet of a two headed bride
Her mission keeps her from picking them up.
A two headed bride knows that being is not having.
She knows that loneliness -- and by loneliness I don't mean not
 having anyone to talk to when it's raining -- but loneliness
 when telephones are black snakes with eggs, doors are mouths
 with open sores, streets buildings and people are crazy red
 streams of stiff kayaks and hooked lish
She knows that loneliness is the natural state of man
 and that friendship, marriage and childbirth are just mirrors
 you hold up vainly for a minute, drop and spend years picking
 the shards from your feet.
A two headed bride knows all ankles are bound and to take the
 tiny step is to move even too readily and to stay still
 even is to crash up against seeds and blossoms.
A two headed bride does not need a man.
At night alone, after you've invented her, she invents you.
And although her nails are too long and she refuses to comb her hair,
 she's kind to you
And since she knows you are your own most diligent executioner,
 she plays pardoner, balm-carrier, Mary of the herbs and scarves.
She uses the meaner side of her personality to criticize others,
 to point out where others have failed,
 where others have given you the wrong change and then called you a liar.
Alone at night on the airfield of your unlandable self with the
 puttering motor of your own heart, a two headed bride is
 a parachute with a jump option.

The truth is plain.
In the bridal chamber there is nothing to do

But lift and drop the hem of an impossible dress
To make miniscule stitches no eye could perceive
 and no machine could mimic
To fuss with flowers, with veils, with small place cards for the unplaceables
To do all this without considering
The absence of the event
The cessation of purpose
The thinness of the hoax keeps even disaster away
And the steeple the bride stands under peeks over and down to her,
 incredulous, sacrilegious.
Oh beautiful things in the heaven of beauty,
 ignore all the faults,
 the missing parts and the repetitions
Accept this attempt into the hall of beauty
Accept these brides who went to the trouble of dressing
Accept these apologies, these confessions, these overtures one after
 another; these appetizers and dessert without a main course
I'm afraid it was left in an oven in a heaven I forgot to invent.
Hosanna to everything I ever forgot to invent
For they are lying in drawers, on shelves, or taking up whole showroom --
 flawless, irreproachable --
Marry a dream and never wake up.
Marry a dream and know no disappointment, digression or divorce
Marry a dream -- avoid the bridal path --
Marry a dream -- marry marry marry.

THE END OF IT

Sun sun moon stars nature trees animals and people.
When everything is described to death,
Made sensible by the insensible combination of words and pictures
Made palpable by just sitting still long enough to take it in
Take it in:
The two headed bride marries the groom
Perfection and freakishness are a natural couple
They retire inwards toward the mountains
Bread and dairy products appear by magic outside their door
They never quarrel
Sexually, they are a fiasco
Too intelligent to be touched? Who knows
Out from cliffs appear maenads
(Some say summoned by the two headed one)
Who ravage the groom and put an end to him
The two headed bride goes back to the normal bride
Where they become one person again
Oh and more magic:

A tailor's dummy is transformed into a husband
Although they are not uncontrollably happy,
They live ever after.

THE DEVIL AGAIN

"Hello everybody, you know sometimes I get so frustrated and fatigued. Other times my heart gets so warm I want to gather children around me and tell stories. Once upon a time there was a sweet girl (naked under her clothes) who longed for a sweet boy (naked under his clothes) and although they loved each other not this much they kissed. Disappointment makes your hair fall out. Look at all the pretty things around you everyday."

END

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