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The Lark Mirror

by Angelisa Fontaine-Wood

Winifred Harrow swept and swept but still the slutswool clung in the corners in the early morning light. This led her to further exasperation with her sister Blythe up in her bedroom, gathering wool as surely as time and tide. Winifred worked on, and as she worked, she hummed a tune unawares. In the dust a faded satin ribbon, black and frayed, sat abandoned. Into the rubbish it went with so many bits of down drifting in from the dovecote. With double the household chores before her, Winifred had not yet gone out to fetch the morning's messages tied to the pigeons' tiny coral feet, the sisters' livelihood. For the task at hand, she threw off the sheet from the beveled mirror which had been veiled since the morning of the wreck. It was high time. Here, too, those bits of feather floated with the slant motes in the yellowed air as though dancing with the phantoms, downward to the rug over the flagstones. She went to the chimney flue and found it, as she expected, stuffed with Blythe's poems. They had until autumn fully set in, and then the verses would turn to smoke, her grief along with it. Or so the old women promised, when a man was lost at sea in a summer storm, when no corpse could be laid to rest. Thus, the ashes could still claim their own. The catch, though, was that no human eye should read the words the young widow committed to paper, lest the souls of the dead be lost to us forever. Winifred had thus far, however, resisted.

#

Meanwhile above, Blythe Mésangère, née Harrow, gathered not wool but rather cobwebs. She had spent the first part of the morning perched on a ladder, removing them with long, careful fingers from the ceilings and setting them diligently between the scrimshaw covers of her commonplace book next to the phases of the moon and the tides, rhyme schemes, swatches for day frocks, and pressed wildflowers (campion, yarrow, hollyhock) and their watercolor doubles. As with snowflakes, no two were exactly alike.

Thinking to trace the webs later for lace, she wound her bobbins with the long strands of white silk thread and with her heron-head scissors cut them short, brushing the ends to the floor. It was in fact high season for cobwebs, this time of dragonflies, rosehips, withered wild mallow and the peaches gone grainy, rose gold skin ready to fade once more to pale. She dreaded watching the last brambleberries fall from their bushes. Soon would come the trees shedding bands of parchment fluttering down and the bittersweet scent of the chimneys awakening from their long summer's sleep. This would spell the end of her mourning verses. After that, the dizzying, wild ballet of starlings and snowflakes with the solstice and the fire would ravage the last of her work.

For now, however, she stretched out on the sofa at the foot of her bed, her head on its scrolled arms, slipping off her green velvet slippers, which had for some time hung precipitously upon her toes. Alone with a sudden rainfall and the last rose scone, she lit a candle in the shy light and put it, as of old, on the window sill, where the sparrows quarreled over breadcrumbs, as a sign that she was waiting, still. With that thought she took up her French dictionary, committing to her spotty memory: "*miroir aux alouettes*—a lure of twirling wood starred over with shards of looking glass that would trap larks with their play of light. Figuratively therefore some trickery that could take you in at your peril: 'lark mirror.'"

Poor creatures, then, the larks: she thought of the messenger pigeons out back with their eternal comings and goings, like the waves they flew over. The Captain had over their long courtship

much time to tell her of the bower birds in the far lands he knew, who would tempt a mate by building a mansion, by avian standards, filled with sparkling treasures. The waves cut short his promise. In the sky above strayed the summer's last swifts. There would be no more aubades come dusk of thrushes and blackbirds. She recalled how, at the nightingale's first hush, he would sing her a song of his youth, his home, strophes of a nightingale, of a clear fountain, of long loving one lost,

À la claire fontaine
M'en allant promener
J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle
Que je m'y suis baigné

Il y a longtemps que je t'aime
Jamais je ne t'oublierai
Il y a longtemps que je t'aime
Jamais je ne t'oublierai

Sous les feuilles d'un chêne
Je me suis fait sécher
Sur la plus haute branche
Un rossignol chantait.

When she first laid eyes upon him, she had found him reading a volume of French verse. His solitude there in the deserted park seemed to surpass the mere lack of people. He seemed apart. She asked in broken French if he came from abroad, and the artless turn of phrase appeared to charm him. He offered his services to practice when she would, and after an exchange he lent her the book he had been reading. So much of it was beyond her school girl grammar, but this at least was within her reach, the singer wishing the roses were still on the rose-tree and that his beloved still loved him.

Je voudrais que la rose
Fût encore au rosier
Et que ma douce amie
Fût encore à m'aimer

When she called to return the book, he took her through some others of his favorite lines, untangling the words from the arcane knotting. Still, though, her favorite remained this simple song of longing: "Long have I loved thee and never shall forget..."

Il y a longtemps que je t'aime
Jamais je ne t'oublierai

Blythe wept into the lachrymatory again, taking it from the mantelpiece. The clear glass bottle was given her by Winifred just after the storm. Once she had filled it with her tears, her mourning would be over, or so her sister told her, and then they could get on as before. Blythe doubted this as much as what good the fires in the fireplace would do. She paid at least lip service and wrote another rondeau into her notebook. There was wisdom in custom—sometimes, at least.

While she scribbled, Grimpilkins in his sable grace played with a dusty black satin ribbon which lay abandoned on the floorboards. Curious, she fetched it from him and laid it flat upon her

knee, combing the frayed edges with her fingertips, nearly remembering something lost to her, when the bedroom door groaned open to her sister, broom in hand.

When first Winifred saw the candle lit at such an hour her first instinct was to scold. Further to the waste of it, Blythe risked calling back the dead with such nonsense, and that was the last thing she needed, they needed. Memories of the two of them came flooding in as she watched her sister frail and alone: teaching her to put up her hair, to rhyme a basic sonnet, and how proud Winifred was to see Blythe set her first *terzanelle*. She could see still the rounder cheeks of the young girl she brought safely into the angles of adulthood and then to her marriage, though as guardian Winifred stalled as she might. She had wondered at the time how she would get along without her daily company, that giggle given now to the Captain and no longer to her. All the other sisters had followed on the heels of their parents to an early grave, to never so much as go beyond a quatrain.

"I've taken the sheets off the mirrors—you might do the same up here. Afterwards, come down, and I'll make us a pot of tea—*vervain*? *Linden blossom*? Your lace is as you laid it aside in the bow window—I've not touched it."

There was that much at least; if only she could negotiate a truce between her sister and the dust. "You ought to rest, Winifred. I tire simply watching you." "I'll rest over a pot of tea." After Winifred left, Blythe gazed at his oval miniature on ivory lain on the cherrywood nightstand. She removed her whalebone busk from her corset. Its surface was engraved in hearts and love rhymes in his own hand on long voyages.

Il y a longtemps que je t'aime
Jamais je ne t'oublierai

"Long have I loved and never shall forget..." She ran her fingers over it like one blind over a beloved face. She sobbed her eyes swollen, catching her tears again in the lachrymatory. Grimpilikins nosed through the door and jumped to her lap, blinked his languorous, amber eyes, and purred a feline lullaby. The blank stare of the sheeted psyche mirror faced her down. It must one day come down, she knew, but to uncover it meant that time had not stopped, that she must continue and without him, that she must brave the rest of the day and the day after and even then the day after that. It also meant she must see herself standing there alone. And so she left it, splashed her face in the basin and went down to the parlor.

#

"Ah there you are—none too soon and none too late, the tea is just ready. Sit." Winifred, brushed a silvering lock back over her bespectacled ear. She plumped up the pillows and fussed over the china, and feigned herself unbothered by the waiting. "I decided on lavender." She wondered at the pain of this loss, how it compared to losing an entire family. Blythe had lost them, too, of course, but she had been so young, what would she even remember? Would her parents have approved of this match? Had she done right in consenting, and with a foreigner at that? As a spinster it was hard to know. It seemed to Winifred that Blythe's place was with her and the birds, near the graveyard full of family and not in some mansion across the sea, however grand. At least, she had thought at the time, they were to live here with her, before he had a home built for the couple. Now it was the two remaining sisters, once again and for the foreseeable future. Any further suitors would be a problem to settle in its own time, sufficient to the day the evil thereof.

Blythe watched the sunlight glance off the tea. Still, she took the porcelain handle as she might take her cobwebs or her bobbins and breathed in the scent of the garden in full summer. There she had wandered with him, gathering the very lavender she now sipped, for had they stayed in the parlor then inevitably would enter Winifred bustling in with tea, with needlework, with

whatever slight reason to keep their company. And so they strayed in the wood for the vervain, wandering further (who had led whom?) for the early brambleberries before the birds took first choice. Enough made it back for pie, but only just. Winifred was never entirely pleased with their scant cull for the hours spent. Now the leaves would soon sicken and waste. She took up her lace bolster and began to thread the bobbins and set the pattern according to her currently favorite cobweb. "So what messages have the birds brought in, and from whom?" she asked her elder sister, turning the conversation to the messenger pigeons. "Janet Wildgoose has once again lost her rents and sent a villanelle to her landlord. She spent them of course but what rhyme is there to that? Antoinette Herrick sent a sestina to Alexander Arundel pleading time. For what she did not say. The Misses Wish posted a flyer for their new school in terza rima, one for each of the first families across the channel. "In English? Terza Rima?" Blythe raised her eyebrows, impressed. As the two sisters avoided the subject at hand, neither noticed as Grimpilikins on his back batted at a strip of black satin, matte with age, its ends unravelling.

#

The cat stretched upon her bedroom mantelpiece, weaving his slender body through the books and bibelots. Here he surveyed his domain, eyes slit in half slumber, just the color of the late summer sun creeping through the slats in the shutters. The sea patiently swept the shores beyond, light bouncing off the violet waves. He stared at Blythe and knocked to the floor a shadow box of figures woven of her family's tresses. Blythe, though, lay utterly still and studied a tiny speck-of-gold spider spin silk from a copper curl. It dropped downward, intent, and with no sense that this endeavor was fated to end badly. For now though, with nothing to bid her to duties (but Winifred), she let it go about its business and watched. In the margins of her French books she had once noted that "silk" translated to "soie" but "soi" to "self." The spider spun out the stuff of itself, from "soi" to "soie." She had not picked up her lace since yesterday when Winifred had pointedly handed her the bolster. When she stood, the embryo of web stretched to breaking and what became of the tiny spider she never knew, only that unwary flying things would not have her hair for their doom. She plumped the cat's basket and found there the black ribbon that had been his plaything of late. It stirred something in her that once again she could not rightly bring back to mind. She brushed it away and left into the afternoon.

#

Down in the parlour Blythe took up her bolster by the bay window. Grimpilikins pawed at her fingers, which were at once desultory and nimble, twisting and crossing the gossamer threads. Soon, though, her hands left off the lace, and she stared at the tarnished silver stain of the sea, under an opaque sky. She remembered when the summer seemed an endless run of halcyon days. Under a hushed and peaceful sun with its flock of lamblike clouds, she looked to the imminent return of the man so long her lover, so briefly her husband, thanks to his long voyages, the banns, and Winifred balking. Such serene weeks, she was certain, would last them at least to the equinox, and luck would hold for them beyond that, if only on lending terms. Come true autumn and the rains, he would teach her the subtle ways of the alexandrine and tell her tales of his travels, of stars in the far south, and the ways of their wildflowers, in front of the fire. There was world enough, there was time. When Winifred foresaw the storm, Blythe could but laugh until some hours later the dark grey came massing in, walling out all trace of blue. Then the winds kicked up, raging at the windowpanes, rattling the shutters closed in panic. Thunder and brutal flashes of light drove Grimpilikins bolting to some secret nook to hide. She thought of her husband under the sheets of water pouring from the heavens and surely overwhelming his ship from the deeps. She waited up until the first light before dawn and ran down to the beach. Winifred tried in vain to stop her. In the pale preface to

daytime, the last of the scavengers hunted for the wreck's leftovers while she searched amongst the splintered planks and bloated bodies floating here and there or washed up to shore. None bore his face, however distorted. That there was nothing to forgive Winifred, Blythe, in her worst moments of grief, could not entirely convince herself. "What were you humming?" Blythe asked "Humming?" "Yes, just now, as I came in..." "I don't know what you mean—I've just been winding the clocks and dusting the bookshelf—as you can see." "‘A la Claire Fontaine’" she sang it softly "‘il y a longtemps que je t'aime jamais je ne t'oublierai’... he would—" "If you say so, dear—could you tend to the clocks upstairs?" Trudging upstairs, Blythe wondered why she should help the clocks along on their march into tomorrow and all those tomorrows to follow, and to what end. And cannot the dust, like the ashes we must sooner or later become, rest in peace? At least Captain Mésangère lying somewhere fifty fathoms deep would not suffer the indignity of being chased away by her sister's feather duster. If nothing else, it was an excuse to take her refuge again above. She carried along her work bolster as pretext and made her way upwards, Grimpilikins trailing like a shadow after her.

Winifred picked up the strip of black silk he left behind and threw it away.

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Blythe knew she must go down again soon, but when it came to actually quitting her bedroom, she couldn't bring herself to leave the velvet silence for more chatter. The clocks she had not touched. Shadows crept into the sheet concealing the mirror. She remembered Winifred allowing her, along with the other littlest ones, to use the linen bedclothes. Blythe, Maria, and Elizabeth trailed around as a set of miniature ghosts. That, too, came true. Sometime later—glassy-eyed and feverish—they rushed to join their parents and leave the two last sisters behind. Winifred had once again hammered out the couplets to the headstones in the graveyard, as Blythe herself was yet too young to properly rhyme an epitaph. The bell sounded, and she heard her sister call up the stairs. She thought to go down at least and push food plausibly about her plate. Winifred would not be fooled once it came to putting away the remains, but Blythe could at least carry on through the meal without too much bother. And she could lay a dish of cream for Grimpilikins. He mewed, and she danced his black ribbon in front of him a moment before he trailed after her.

#

After a supper of she knew not what, Blythe approached the message desk while Winifred went to fetch the elderflower cordial. Here lay orderly stacks of the day's unfolded and unsealed notes. One among them, a corner peeking from the midst of a small heap, caught her eye with its masculine black ink, a gentleman's hand, unmistakable. Couched in perfect alexandrine couplets of French, the message told of a bark, sailing seas perilous, overwhelmed by gales, deprived evermore of the sight of harbor, deprived of hope, plaything of the waves, set adrift to wander far from a beloved embrace. There was no signature. Holding it to the light there was no watermark either. As her sister returned, Blythe steadied her voice, "Is this from today?" "Is what from what?" "This, which pigeon carried it, whence did it come?" "Oh, that, nothing at all—in haste someone forgot to sign; now set it back, or rather give it to me."

Blythe blinked back tears then ran away with the letter in hand. Winifred thought she had buried it carefully in the tiny piles of paper. She went to the chimney with the broom and shook out the folded papers like so many moths stained with soot: the work of Blythe's grief. Here were her hidden lays and odes, elegies and epitaphs, rondeaux, bref doubles, descorts, forms she had learned

from her elder sister in her first youth and then later, as she aged into adulthood, from the Captain. For Winifred had begun to read.

#

For some time, Blythe stood before the sheeted psyche watching the shadows darken the blue white folds, minute by inching minute, like afterthoughts, or something left unsaid, tasting of dust and ashes. She breathed deeply once, held it, and then tore the veil away. Underneath she found not her face staring back but an endlessly splintered image – webbed cracks shattering her into so many rhymes of herself. In the fragments in between, the jagged interstices, she could glimpse a shadow—one she knew, dear above all others, a shadowy profile: a brow, a jaw, a broad shoulder. Time was a trick of the light. She reached her hand toward it when the knock of something winged flew against a window pane, cracking its clear glass. At that rap she turned her head to the last of the setting sun and then back to the remains of the fissured mirror. It held no one now but her infinite selves reflected back. She flew down the stairs and out to the garden below her bedroom window where she found the poor creature. She cupped the small swelling oval of his body, trembling for release, silk feathers soft against her fingers. Attached to his feet was a tiny, furled scroll. She opened it to find inside, again in perfect alexandrine couplets, a man addressing a mirror, jealous of embracing his beloved if only in simulacrum, but who has only the shade of her body while he himself holds her soul. After placing the pigeon safely in the dovecote, she ran up the backstairs to the bedroom once more and lit a candle. Its light caught in the shards of mirror scattered over floorboards like a silver puzzle. She took down her commonplace book and set down the lines repeating in her head—that song of old—next to her own verses, between two pressed cobwebs. On the cherrywood nightstand lay a volume of French verse that she knew nearly by heart, his early gift to her. There was one she particularly loved, a song he would sing her, and there he had set down the bookmark. Grimpilkins curled around her ankles like smoke, in his mouth a length of shadowy silk. She picked it up and opened the old present, which turned of its own will and volition to

Il y a longtemps que je t'aime
Jamais je ne t'oublierai.

It had opened to that page as if itself remembering that song of remembrance, of yearning after one lost: “Long have I loved thee and never shall forget.” For it had long been marked by the black satin ribbon sewn into its spine that she held now in her hand, unravelling. How it had escaped the binding she could not imagine—had Grimpilkins torn it loose? She laid it again carefully over the page like a beloved body into a grave. To put it on the mantelpiece, she stepped between the slivers of the psyche, still glinting in the candlelight, like one tripping over the waters of the river Styx. Midnight struck and echoed in the empty bedroom.

#

After some hours, Winifred knocked and knocked to no answer. Finally, she opened the door herself, to find only the cat on the mantelpiece. He stared at her. Keeping his gaze intently upon hers, he carefully placed his paw on the side of the lachrymatory. Its shards soon joined those of the shattered mirror on the floor. Winifred swept them up, along with cobwebs and dust, the white silk threads cut off from the bobbins, and a frayed black satin ribbon, abandoned. She hummed to herself unawares and wondered where she would find her sister.