
The
density of
words

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My sister, they say, was like my father. I, they say, was the spitting image of my mother, the very likeness. 'Since everyone tends to love those who resemble them, this mother adored her eldest daughter and, at the same time, felt a terrible aversion for the younger. She would make her eat in the kitchen and work all the time.' So, at least, goes the story or parable or fable, or whatever you want to call it, that is written about us. You can take it literally or not, although the final moral is exceedingly perverse and poorly disguised.

At the time the story was told, our father was no longer around to confirm the facts.

Neither was the fairy.

Because there was a fairy, or so it seems. A fairy who split into two and ended up sending each of us sisters off to the ferocious fulfilment of our different destinies. Both destinies were too schematic and both were intolerable.

||| THE DENSITY OF WORDS

What sort of sisters were we? What sort of sisters, I ask myself. I ask other questions too: who wants to look like whom? Who chooses and why?

Sweet and lovely as she was, they say – like our dead father, they say – as an adolescent, my sister always had to carry the can or rather scour it clean, as well as scrub the floors and go twice daily to the distant fountain to fetch water. According to that same story, it was my role, like our all-too-present mother, to be the spoiled, proud, flattered, unbearable and capricious one.

Now things have taken a decisive turn
and

out of my mouth spring toads and snakes.

Out of my mouth spring toads and snakes. It's not as awful as it sounds, these creatures have slippery skins and slide easily up out of my throat.

The problem is that now nobody loves me, not even my mother who, before, seemed to love me so much. She says that I no longer resemble her. That's not true: I resemble her more than ever.

Anyway, that's how it is and it's not my fault. I open my mouth and, quite spontaneously, toads and snakes spring forth. I speak and the words become matter. A short word and a toad appears. The snakes emerge with the longer words, like 'anaconda' for example, not that I would ever utter the word 'viper'. I wouldn't want to offend mother.

Although she was the one who exiled me to the wood to live amongst the brambles, having brought me up wrapped in cotton wool. Not like my sister who, after her big adventure, lives like a princess, having married a prince.

'You, on the other hand, will never marry, not talking the way you talk, you foul-mouthed creature,' my mother said angrily, shortly after I got back from the fountain, and then she turned on her heel for fear that I might reply and fill

up her house with reptiles. Very clean reptiles, I must add, and I should know.

I can no longer remember in which of my previous lives nor in which age I committed the sin of pride.

I have a vague image of the scene, as if in dreams. I'm afraid that it may be due as much to some ancient memory as to the fact that I have read and re-read it so often and in such varied forms.

It all begins – began – one morning when my sister came back from the fountain and said good morning to us and out of her mouth came two enormous pearls that rolled around on the floor. My mother chased after them before they disappeared under the larder cupboard. Well, laughed my sister, and out of her mouth fell an emerald, and when she sat down to tell her story, she showered the whole floor with fragrant flowers and flashing jewels.

My mother, who, in those days, was neither slow-witted nor lazy, immediately ordered me to go to the same fountain from which my sister had just returned so that the same fairy could bestow an identical gift on me. Just this once, said my mother, you don't even have to come back with a full pitcher of water, you just have to offer a few sips to the horrible, toothless old crone who will ask you for a drink, just as your sister did, and look how well things have turned out for her. She's not horrible, protested my magnanimous sister, and roses poured out of her mouth, and I hoped that their thorns would prick her. No, of course she's not horrible, said my mother, rapidly retracting what she had said, not at all: she's a generous fairy, getting on in years, who gave your sister this splendid gift, and she'll do the same for you. Your lovely sister, she says, seeing her for the first time.

That was how it was that I went to the fountain, under protest. I was carrying a light silver flask and I sat down to

wait for the toothless scrounger to appear. I was perfectly prepared to give a sip of water to the old fairy, but not to the noble lady, all dolled up, who suddenly appeared and ordered a sip of water from me like someone issuing a command. I refused point-blank. No, madam, I said, if you're thirsty, find your own flask, I have other duties to attend to.

That is why,
now,

I am alone in the wood and out of my mouth
s p r i n g t o a d s a n d s n a k e s .

I don't regret it at all: now I'm a writer.

The words are mine, I am their mistress, I say them openly, I speak all the words that were once forbidden to me; I shout them, I scatter them through the woods, because they bound or slither away from me, all with a life of their own. I like them, I like being able to say them, although, sometimes, I do find a few of them rather repellent. I overcome my feelings of repugnance, however, and now I manage to suppress the desire to retch when all that viscousness becomes too much for me. Nothing should be too much for me. The toads leap about me with a certain grace and I coil the snakes around my arms like sumptuous bracelets. The men who try to approach me – the few that appear in the wood – flee when they see them, terrified.

Men leave me well and truly alone.

Could that be the fairy's real curse?

Because it was a curse. It says so in the story, fable or parable of which I have a vague memory. I think I read it. I recognise it in this business of speaking evil, this evil habit of mine of saying what others do not want to hear, still less see made flesh. In fact, as I make all those words mine, as I wander through the wood, I feel rather privileged. And very alone. The toads and snakes do not make for very brilliant

company, although some are as bright as jewels. They are the most poisonous ones. There are friendly snakes, though, and affectionate little frogs. They console me.

They console me in part. Sometimes I think of my sister, the one who went to the fountain and returned spitting jewels. Her sweet words became jasmines and diamonds, rubies, roses, carnations, amethysts. Remembering that does not make me feel particularly happy. My sister, the story reminds me, was beautiful, sweet, generous. More than that, she was transformed into a fountain of wealth. The son of the King did not let such an opportunity pass him by and he married her.

I, on the other hand, sit amidst the toads and snakes and I write. I write using every letter, every word, and I try to tell the other side of this defamatory story of divisions.

I write for the few, because only they can bear to look me in the face.

Isolation in a way ennobles me. I am mistress of my own space, of my doubts – what doubts? – and of my feelings of contrition.

Now I know that I don't want lovely ladies coming to ask me for a sip of water. Perhaps I don't want fairies or miracles. I refuse to be seduced.

I barely speak.

Sometimes the viscosity emerges anyway, in a sigh.

Suddenly, an iridescent lizard slips out of my mouth. It makes me happy; for a long while, I sit looking at it, I try to utter another, but I can't do it, however often I repeat the word 'lizard'. Only toads and frogs, but I'm still not entirely discouraged. I kiss some of the frogs just in case, seeking some way to emulate my sister. I get no results, there is no prince on the horizon, the frogs remain frogs and, since they emerge from my mouth, I can even acknowledge them as my children. They are my words. Then I fall

silent. Only the lizard manages to get a smile out of me. I know that I cannot trap it and I have no intention of kissing it. I know that, were it a female, and under certain circumstances, it could reproduce itself on its own through a simple process of parthenogenesis, as they call it. I don't know what sex it belongs to. Yet another mystery, and there are hundreds of them.

I think of my sister in her warm castle, embroidering everything with the pearls of round, feminine words. My lizard, if it's a male and if it found a female, will bite her neck, coiling about her, in order to commit an act that is difficult to imagine with one's reason but not with one's senses. My sister, in the safety of her blue castle – blue is the colour of princes – probably spends all day threading necklaces out of the varicoloured precious stones, making garlands out of her flowers, and crowns that will partially wither and fade. In the wood, I, on the other hand, know not a moment's tedium. I have to hack a path through the undergrowth, while she walks round and round a castle brimming with her own words. She must proceed with extreme caution so as not to slip on a pearl or cut her tongue on the edge of a diamond. Her kisses must, moreover, be silent kisses. They say that the prince is very handsome, though not very bright, and that the only interest my sister's conversation holds for him is its exchange value. How could it be otherwise? She probably talks about embroidery, weaving, domestic tasks which she loves now that she is not obliged to do them. The castle overflows with riches: her words.

I write my words so as not to have to spatter them with scales. Even so they shine sometimes, when the light catches them and, to me, they seem like jewels. Especially those little frogs the colour of fire blotched with quetzal green, so small you could pin them on your lapel, so lethal that

the Indians in tropical regions use them to poison their arrowheads. I spit them out rather gracefully so that they do not even touch my mouth. They are the words that once I was forbidden to say. Now they clarify me, they do me good. I recover a previously unknown dignity.

There are worse words. I'm still looking for them.

I have to admit that before they sent me into exile in the wood, they did what they could to tame me. Be quiet, be quiet, they would implore me. Silence is a woman's best garment, they would say, a shut mouth catches no flies. Really? Then what will my toads feed on? I asked alarmed, or, rather, indignant, forgetting that my toads do not exist until they are pronounced.

Sad to say, I would not exist either, if I did not pronounce them.

No one demands silence of my beautiful sister, least of all her husband. She must feel fulfilled.

I, on the other hand, feel what I never felt before I went to the fountain. And I don't mind having to cut my way through the brambles or hold back the branches that block my path. It matters still less to me when my feet plunge into the tide of rotten leaves and the trunks of fallen trees give way beneath my weight. I like the tears of the wood weeping like lichens from the topmost branches: I can speak and sing here, and the profusion of toads that emerge are grateful to me. Then I dance to the rhythm of my words and I write them with my feet in a crazy calligraphy.

I use the dampest parts of the wood to proffer blasphemies of a type new to women. That is my prerogative because, as I believe I have said, from my lovely mouth emerge frogs and snakes and toads and tadpoles and other creatures that enjoy the damp and frolic about. I too frolic with the words and keep my legs wide open.

I think of my saccharine sister who only has flowery words in her mouth. I pity her, sometimes.

I think that if she ever remembers me, which is unlikely there in her limbo, perhaps she too pities me. Quite wrongly. Because in the wood, in the midst of amphibians and reptiles, I am a writer and I feel at home. Sometimes. When it's not raining and thundering and the croaking hasn't become as unbearable to me as the bellowing of a thousand bulls in rut.

I hate them. I fear them. Those non-existent rutting bulls.

My sister, on the other hand, knows only sweet little lambs whose fleeces she threads with sapphires or sprinkles with topaz dust and behind whose ears she places hibiscus flowers. A monument to bad taste.

The only bad taste I know is in my mouth, when one of the following questions chokes me: who could ever love me? who could ever contain me?

But I am a writer. Toads and snakes encapsulate my need for love, my need for fear.

For the record, I never say the word 'cobra' or 'yará', the word 'python' or 'boa constrictor'. And that not saying says everything.

It must be acknowledged that both my sister and I enjoy certain privileges. For example, we hardly need any food; the words nourish us. As I make my way through the forest, I feel light; she must feel, shall we say, plump with sweet words. A touch diabetic, poor thing. I don't want to imagine her, but I do, installed in her castle that I can see from afar. I don't even want to go close.

My retinue of toads croaks, the vipers guide me along a trail through the wood that gradually dwindles to nothing. I reach the fields. I don't want to approach my sister's castle, but I do.

I can see her in the distance: she's standing in a watch-

tower, she's waiting for me, I see her gesturing to me, I'm sure she's calling my name, because white petals fly through the air like a spring breeze beneath flowering cherry trees. My sister is calling me – petals fall – I run towards her. I run towards the castle which, at that moment, as it lowers its drawbridge, is opening its luckily toothless mouth. I run faster, still escorted by my retinue of reptiles and amphibians. I cannot say a word. My sister runs across the bridge to me and when we embrace and burst out in words of recognition, I see over her shoulder that one of my snakes is wearing a diadem of diamonds, one of my cobras has a ruby in its brow, a large carnivorous flower is devouring one of my poor toads, a frog is chewing on an Arabian jasmine flower and is beginning to blush, another carnivorous plant, like an unctuous trumpet, is devouring a snake, a wide-open, bright red bromeliad takes in a tree frog and offers its heart as a nest. And while my sister and I tell each other everything we haven't been able to tell each other for years and years, a thousand jewelled frogs are born in the bromeliad, and they lull us to sleep with their polyphonic chorus.

Avatars

THE LORD OF THE SOUTH is bored, the Lord of the North is bored, and, as they did on the three previous occasions, they spend this, their annual reunion, complaining to each other. They no longer know what to do for fun, or not very much. They have no hope whatsoever of engaging in the thing that gave them so much pleasure in their youth – war. There's no chance of a war now. The Central King forced them to draw in their horns a long time ago: he commanded them, exhorted them, persuaded them and finally, in order to placate them, he rewarded them. But when he saw all their backslidings and relapses, he had to resort to threats. Very serious threats, for His Majesty is always serious. And both the Lord of the North and the Lord of the South understood the risks they were running not only as regards their respective dukedoms but also as regards their respective heads. So there was nothing left to do but feel bored and complain when they met up each year, and