

Nobeard

What interests us in the character of Gilles de Rais is generally what binds us to the monstrosity that a human being harbors since tender infancy under the name of nightmare.

– Georges Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*

I. Bedroom

There were break-ins in the neighborhood. A man lingering in the backyards, in darkness and daylight.

Some time has passed since then and my wife tells me that the dog was up barking last night. He was standing on the edge of the bed, barking into the darkness, at the empty doorway. I don't recall any of this.

– I was asleep, I say.

– He was barking at your cats, she says. And by cats she means rats. We don't have rats. We have something and it periodically drives the dog wild. He runs into the hall and snuffles and scratches at the baseboards and the defunct floor registers. He growls and barks and eventually gives up, wears out the routine, comes back to bed.

But last night was something else apparently. The darkness was there and he barked at it from the edge of the bed.

II. Library

The book has an orange, library binding with a creature imprinted in black on its spine, perhaps a goblin, and the name of the book is something like *Folk and Fairytales from Around the World*. It is the only book I check out repeatedly from the library of John Cabrillo

Elementary School in Sacramento, California.

The John Cabrillo Elementary School library is small and intense. Books line three walls and there are short, two-sided stacks in the center of the room as well, and child-sized chairs and tables. It is like a dollhouse library. Even the librarian does not seem quite real, as though she is play-acting for us, preparing us for meeting a real librarian out there in the other world, beyond the emerald-leafed hedges.

I never finish the book.

Later, after I've discovered *Folk and Fairytales from Around the World*, and perhaps after I've stopped checking it out repeatedly, though I've not yet forgotten the power of one particular story in it, a friend, or rather an acquaintance, a boy who I will eventually come to dislike, shows me a photo in another book. A young mother preparing to breast-feed her child. A close-up, in black and white, covering two oversized pages and a circle drawn around the mother's exposed nipple in black ballpoint.

— Look at this.

I don't understand.

— Didn't your mother breast-feed you?

I don't know. So I ask. My mother seems uncertain. Perhaps she is shocked. She says no. I'm not sure that I believe her now, though I did then, and I am advised not to look at such pictures, not to talk to such people. Too late.

III. There Is Only One Story

There is only one story that I recall from *Folk and Fairytales from Around the World*. It is the story of Bluebeard. I'm not even certain now if that is what it was called in this book, but I am certain that this is the story. A young woman marries a wealthy man to whom

she does not want to be married because he frightens her. He has had several wives before her, perhaps they were even her sisters. On their wedding night, the fearsome husband gives her the keys to every door in his house and tells her what each one is for. The final key, he says, goes to that little door at the top of the stairs. You must never open that door or I will be very angry. The husband goes away on a trip and the princess, bored, wanders his immense castle, opening every door with the keys she's been given. She is amazed by her husband's wealth, but soon tires of every pleasure until she gets to the final door. She opens it and discovers a filthy closet covered in gore. The dismembered bodies of all her husband's previous wives, perhaps her sisters, are there and she comes to realize that, now that she has seen, she will be next. The husband returns. She is doomed. Somehow she escapes and lives happily ever after.

Perhaps the story is familiar, or parts of it, anyway. I have tried to paraphrase it as I remember it from that first reading, trying to keep it as free as possible from subsequent versions I have encountered elsewhere. Regardless, what I recall in particular from that first version of a story that will continue to haunt and inspire me are these things:

The fear of the bride.

The transaction with the keys and the husband's admonishments.

The bored, abandoned bride wandering the castle.

Her fear giving way to wonder.

The horror of the filthy closet.

The happy ending.

I'm not certain how many times I reread that story, but I know it was several, that that story in particular is what drew me back again and again to *Folk and Fairytales from Around the World*. No other story seemed to hold the kind of power that one did, and perhaps that's why I never finished the book.

IV. Bedroom

I have my own turntable now and Bartók's only opera is playing on it. His strange polytonality and Béla Balázs's ambiguous libretto are transforming my favored image of Bluebeard into a monolithic Slav, into Kékszakállú. "Bluebeard" is a cartoon. "Barbe-Bleu" also isn't quite right. Too refined. I prefer the German "Blaubart" with his brutal, final "t." But now this "Kékszakállú," both lyrical and savage. His need is inexplicable. He is a deep reservoir of terror that has no reason. Kékszakállú is as haunted as I am by his warning, yearning love song: *Judit . . . Judit.. . .*

V. Library

Still later, I am writing a story about Blaubart, a charmless, chintzy magician, the washed up scion of a line that extends back to Cagliostro and St. Germaine, to clans from the Carpathians, to the sorcerers of the Egyptian New Kingdom. Bluebeard as has-been, as schlub, wifeless, harmless, tragically heroic. Bluebeard without the filthy closet. The story, too, is a failure. But in the process my Bluebeard continues to accrete his crust of camp and horror. In the stacks I discover Bataille's book on Gilles de Rais. Once considered a hero for having served in the company of Jeanne d'Arc during the Hundred Years' War, Gilles was later tried and executed in 1440 for the sadistic murders of hundreds of children, mostly young boys, who he kidnapped or otherwise had procured for him and then sodomized. In some cases they were sacrificed in occult rituals. While there is no connection, Gilles has sometimes been considered the inspiration for the Bluebeard legend popularized by Charles Perrault in the 1690s. Bataille's is a book of true crime, true horror. Gilles is the filthy closet multiplied.

VI. Living Room

The living room is not a room for living. It is a room for working. Sometimes it is a room for play. Sometimes the play occurs around the stacks of his books my father has removed from the shelves and placed in careful piles on newspaper to protect the carpet while he

meticulously dusts them, shakes them, and returns them to their place. These stacks are the site of my brother's urban warfare activities, green plastic men and matériel. The living room is a place of business and play. It is a place where things can stand unmolested and gather dust. It is a place where the Christmas tree stands after everything has been put away, rearranged, secured. The turntable plays the Beatles, Fleetwood Mac, *Sesame Street*, Bing Crosby and Mario Lanza singing Christmas carols.

The living room is also a library. Most of my father's books fill shelves on one wall. And across the room there is another, octagonal set of shelves containing even more books that he has acquired during his time in college and in the Navy.

Look at this.

My brother introduces me to my father's *Bluejacket's Manual*, a guide to knots, fitness, signaling, small arms training, and the care and maintenance of facial hair, among other things.

VII. KTXL Sacramento

Joey Heatherton is in bed, luxurious ivory sheets pulled up to her neck. Richard Burton, neatly goateed, lies next to her, on top of the sheets, his hair a stiff, blue-black wave. Joey has asked Richard a question and Richard is telling a story. The sound is down and their murmuring seems more sexualized than is common at this time of night. They live in the lurid, oversaturated colors of early 1970s European cinema.

- Camp, someone says.
- Soft porn, says another.

And now the channel has been changed.

VIII. Monstrosity

The monster is vision that will not turn away. The monster is what

we are not, what we cannot be. And in our innocence we are ignorant, a state we cannot bear, that has the feeling, finally, of monstrosity.

IX. Interlibrary Loan

This is not the film I wanted. I requested Dymytrk's *Bluebeard* (1972), starring Richard Burton as the murderous Baron von Sepper, Joey Heatherton as Anne, Raquel Welch, Virna Lisi, Nathalie Delon, Marilù Tolo, Karin Schubert, Agostina Belli, the voluptuous murdered brides. But I allowed for other editions and Dymytrk's did not arrive.

So, instead, my wife and I are watching Ullmer's *Bluebeard* (1944). John Carradine, *sans* beard, plays Gaston Morrell, a painter and puppeteer, a murderer of beautiful young women, his models, who keep turning up strangled in the Seine. He is given the name "Bluebeard," or "The Bluebeard" by a terrified French populace, unaware of his true identity. Morrell's motives (there must always be a motive for murder, *n'est-ce pas*, reason and logic in the crime thriller?) remain enigmatic for much of the film until, finally, he reveals that what set him off was the failure of an ideal, the failure of a waif, Jeanette, for whom he cared once, when he found her ill in the street, and whose seeming purity inspired his painting of the Maid of Orleans (dimly Jeanne and Gilles continue to haunt the tale), his finest work. When the painting won an award he visited Jeanette, to share the good news, but she turned out, as he says, to be a "low, coarse, loathsome creature," and this failure of character compelled him to murder her. Each subsequent model only reminds him of this betrayal and so they too must die.

My wife asks me to rub her shoulders. My hand comes down on her neck and we laugh until I begin, unintentionally, too hard.

X. Two Questions I Have Never Asked

Why is your beard blue?

Why am I terrified of a blue beard?

XI. Unreason

I am not satisfied with Bluebeard as murderer or madman, as one who can or would testify before a culture that considers him criminal. Perhaps this explains the poor fit of a Morrell, or a von Sepper, or a de Rais. Kékszakállú has no mechanism for explanation. To do so would never occur to him and he would not comprehend the concept. He only exists in the process of his...careful now: to call these “murders” or “crimes” continues to apply the language of the law. Rituals, doses, consummations, transformations, metamorphoses: Kékszakállú’s deeds are the inevitable reciprocations for our wanting to know.

XII. Portrait

No Vandyke or goatee or Hulihee. No muttonchops or French fork or Franz Josef. More like the coarse pelt of a massive, unknown beast, a blue-black beard like a robe, concealing any detail of him you might take to be human. The eyes, too, are from another world. In them, you, puny, are prey. You are skinned alive.

XIII. Bedroom

I am dreaming or I am not. The dark shape stands motionless in the doorway. What does he want? What is he waiting for? The motionless figure observes me helpless.

XIV. Closet

Standing on the threshold of the filthy closet, eyes adjusting to the bloody darkness, we are reaching out eagerly for the unreadable. The attractive power of the Bluebeard legend lies not in Bluebeard, a mechanical agent of destruction, but in our desire to enter the filthy closet from the very moment it appears on the page. The shocking orderliness of its horror—wives hung on the walls, severed heads arranged as in a boutique—is reflected in the law of Bluebeard, a law we read as criminal, but that we, with the little bride acting as our avatar, submit to nonetheless for the sake of an

evolutionary terror, the sake of the inexperienced pleasure.

XV. Kitchen

– Didn't your mother breast-feed you?

I ask my mother about this. She says nothing and immediately I am ashamed. I have introduced something uncomfortable, alienating between us, perhaps the first such thing I can recall, and I know that this is not good. I am not good. I am encouraged to make friends with good people, to make better friends. This boy who I will come to despise, most likely for showing me this photo, for giving me something to introduce into my relationship with my mother that is uncomfortable, is not good.

Some years later I am good and I will be commended for making good choices in friends, for choosing friends who are good. They are good and I am good. Why, I wonder, have I been so good?

XVI. . . . *unbound to the limits of ordinary life.* . . .

Bataille is speaking here of Gilles, of his transformation from human into legend, into a so-called sacred monster, a saint of excess, into Bluebeard. The metamorphosis is necessary, inevitable, because we cannot allow that such monstrosities could really be perpetrated by a human being.

But the desire to be unbounded. This, too, was Gilles's desire. And can't we say the same of the bride of Bluebeard, who convinces herself that his beard is perhaps not so blue, not so fearsome after all; and of Balázs's Judit, who comes to Kékszakállú's weeping castle despite the rumors she has heard. The desire for the singular, to make the unique discovery, the discovery that surpasses reason and evolves us is why we want that key, want only to be shown the steps leading up to the forbidden door, for dear Kékszakállú to go on his way and let us fail at our leisure.

Perhaps this singularity is the source of Bluebeard's fearsome

mutation, the color of his beard the reflection of the horror he now sees all around him, everything stained with blood, the bodies of that ordinary world turned inside out, the invited visitor, the wife as a body in need of decapitation. And this is the new threshold of the monster, what we don't want to understand: how does one begin to see the world anew? What are the risks, even if we could conceive of such a way of seeing, if we could imagine – and yes, oh yes, we can – if we can imagine this, if we were to one day awake and see this way, what happens to us, to that so-called “ordinary world”? Is the little bride made monstrous now by what she has seen? Can we believe that she will now return to herself once she's left Bluebeard's castle?

XVII. Sexual Terror

By this perhaps one might mean a fear of the unimaginable, the unimagined, of the most unexpected uses of the body, one's own or another's. And once the threshold of that terror has been passed, perhaps it is transformed into a terror of what cannot be regained, or of what more can be discovered.

XVIII. Living Room

Look at this.

I am older now and home alone, wandering the house in Sacramento. Now I am looking through my father's books. I see some stacked behind the rows at the front of the octagonal shelves and I pull them out. Among them I find one with a light blue library binding, something to do with sex, a clinical title, a how-to title. At this time I do not know how-to. Not really. It is a book of a certain era that has passed. But not passed out of the house.

In the book I find a line drawing of the vagina. It appears in the midst of an explanation of foreplay. I do not recall the details of the explanation, but I do recall the words “white hot.” This is a level of excitation one wants the female to achieve before concluding foreplay and moving on to intercourse. These are the terms of this

particular classroom. Politely lurid. I never read the book. I do not sneak it to my bedroom, hide it under the mattress, anything like that. I return it to its place, that *white hot*, that line drawing stuck with me now forever. I return the wall of books that defend this knowledge and feel, yes, a little ashamed.

The line drawing is hairless.

XIX. This Story

In this story, I am not Bluebeard. I am no murderous lothario. I am not a wife-killer, a serial murderer, serial seducer. No strangler or butcher. Not one who destroys out of vengeance, disaffection, or impotence. I am no sociopath, no misanthrope, no tragic beast who only exits the woods long enough to lure a bride back to his weeping castle and then. . . . I do not dream of decapitations, am not lured by the blood of others.

Am I, then, in this story, the little bride? Both fearful and ambitious, curious, wandering the castle alone while my brutal husband awaits my misstep, hunts me in what is now my own home whose wonders, without opening that door, I will soon exhaust? Should I just lie still in the bed, then, and await his return, pretend the key is not in my hand, warming with my blood?

XX. Bedroom

I am listening to the darkness. I am looking into the bedroom, listening for signs that my wife is waking up, that she is ready for coffee. And then the dog is up and barking. The dog is barking at me, the dark, still shape in the doorway.