

# HOW I DISCOVERED WHAT I'M NOT

by Lavinia Murray

So this has been my battle—attempting to tell traditional stories but failing, and failing on an epic scale. I've had the training (two residential courses with superlative Ben Haggarty of the Crick Crack Club) but what comes out of my mouth in front of an audience is a spluttering of ridiculous images and unfathomably wonky characters. I find I'm embarrassed to repeat any well known, traditional story. Genuinely embarrassed. I once tried repeating the story of Hercules, beginning with his birth. I remember standing in front of a small, supportive and benign audience and blurting out...

'Birth! Is it a subtraction, an addition, a multiplication or a division? The baby is subtracted from the mother. The baby appears in addition to the mother. The baby is a multiplication of the mother. The baby is division of the mother. Which one is it?' I then went on to the snake entering infant Hercules's nursery, except mine assumed the innocent intention of coiling the child up and using him as a yoyo (which is how the yoyo was invented). Then I tried telling a traditional tale with three sisters setting off to seek their fortune in the world. Only, they were suddenly conjoined triplets, and what with the streets being so narrow, they found they were brushing against the windows on both sides and cleaning them. So, naturally, they began a window cleaning round, the two outer triplets doing the wiping, the one in the middle holding the bucket and taking payments—the trio becoming so rich they didn't need to go to the palace to try their luck. I had no idea I was going to say all that until, well, I was saying it. Then there was a strange case of attempting to retell Red Riding Hood. Only, somehow, Japanese honshu wolves got involved.

According to me, the markings in the honshu wolves' mouths were the lost citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (living on) since the pressure exerted by the wolves' jaws equalled that of the nuclear shockwave. Honshu wolves were believed to be protected and hidden by their environment (they're extinct now, or are they?); so were the citizens of two Japanese metropolises by the wolves. Red Riding Hood became a sooty smudge against a silver birch, and Grandmother, a lifelong member of CND, continued her life of civil protests and placard making (using offcuts provided by the woodsman). When the Honshu wolves howled against the moon, little mushroom puffs of radioactive vapour shot out of their mouths alongside the tall shadows cast from bustling streets.

Next, I attempted Cinderella but things went decidedly skewed from the outset. According to me, a grandmother died and was cremated. Grandmother's last wish was that, when her granddaughter married, her ashes would be scattered on the bride.

So the girl grew up and found a suitor. As she broke from the first kiss with her bridegroom, her mother flung grandmother's ashes at her.

The ashes fell and fell until the bride's dress turned from white to grey. They fell until the bride's skin and hair were grey and then, crumb by crumb, drib by drab, the ashes closed her eyes. Mildly nonplussed, the bridegroom borrowed a shovel from a passing gravedigger and began digging his bride free, but as he dug the shovel struck a coffin. He broke open the coffin and out stepped the grandmother now young again and holding the leash of a grey dog.

The grandmother walked the dog to the marriage feast, sat where the bride should have sat, her dog



beside her on the groom's velvet chair, and she ate everything her hands could reach. The food she did not touch turned to ash. The grandmother struck each pile of ash with a knife and out of it rose her dead husband and her dead bridesmaids and the dead chapel in which she was wed, and the dead bell that rang in celebration. And the thin grey dog rose up on its hind legs and barked the sun away so that night fell.

Stars glittered and in the light of each there shone a fragment of the bride, her granddaughter. The new bridegroom went and lay down in a freshly dug grave, so its high walls made it all the better to see his distant and twinkling bride. And the new bridegroom had to content himself with that.

I should have known when I was beaten but I didn't. I persisted. This time it was supposed to be the tale of Rumpelstiltskin. Rumpelstiltskin never made an appearance although someone of the opposite sex and stature did. I set off yarning about a man, all coppery, his fingers ridged and verdigrised and so, so beautifully shaped. He writes, a copper stylus in his hands. The light slows on him like an oil, softening the air around him, pooling from his hair and clothes as the sky darkens and a great moon appears. Then, there she is, a thin, gaunt thing, all spikes and spines and temperamental fingers, she has an almost-not-there-ness, her hands sifting and cupping and cording the mist, curding it into twine, then onto a great copper spinning wheel that was round like a globe, and the mist whiskered and wisped it, clattering across until it rang as though it was link-work, ferrous or silver.

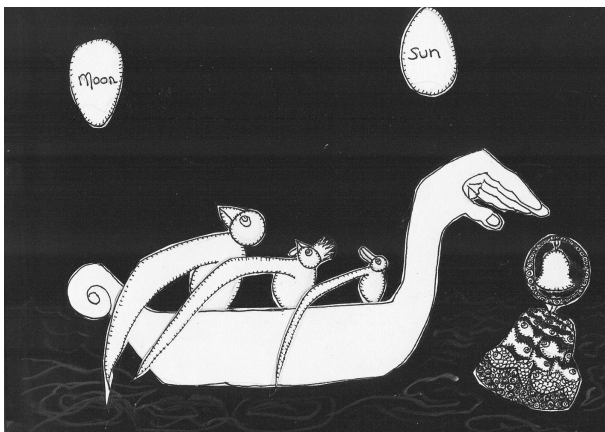
'This is a receipt for your silhouette,' she said. 'Nobody can be seen sideways here. It isn't done.'

The woman had a chin like a sun god, a chin like the point of an egg. She spoke like someone else's biography.

You can see my problem. Finally, I tried creating my own pieces, wondering if they would snap back into traditional tales. Here we go.

## THE TALE OF LITTLE SOREBI

The moon shines on the sea making a great rickety pathway. The moon shines on the sea like a venetian blind dropped on a badly rucked carpet, and then kicked.



A van skitters along the dark, coastal road, and parks by a shuttered postcard kiosk. Out of the driver's side scuttles Mr Shipment, the council's sea-taster, wearing his crab-shell shoes and bladder-wrack tabard. Mr Shipment leans over the sea wall and dips a very long-handled spoon into the high tide and lifts it to his puckered lips and sips and savours, swills it, rinses his mouth, paddles his tongue and spits it back, plop, into the welted waves. It tastes like ghosts.

'Needs a little more salt and a primp of pepper,' says Mr Shipment and empties three tubs of sea salt into the sea, twists his pepper grinder fifteen

times and then stirs with the long spoon and re-tastes.

'Mmm, just about right,' says Mr Shipment, 'that is more-or-less how the sea should taste,'

Bobbing up in the good-tasting sea are all the wax figures from the Wax Museum, each anchored to the sea floor, swimming and rolling out a little way and scudding back. Mr Shipment likes to see them by moonlight in their bright attire.

'Good evening,' he calls and off he goes. Man into van, van into vanishing point.

Back home, Mr Shipment looks after his long-haired children. They dangle by their knees from the parlour ceiling's beams. Mr Shipment runs between them, his left hand and his right hand loaded with deeply bristled brushes, churning his children's silvery hair into feathers and thickets, tousles and tangles, silvery hair so long he can't help but walk in it.

But where is Mrs Shipment? She is imprisoned in her children's hair. She has died there. Now her

skeleton hops from one child's head to another like some kind of enormous nit. Tonight her bones clack inside Little Sorebi's voluminous beehive.

One by one, Mr Shipment lifts his children through the open door and lets the night wind take them. Off they fly, hand in hand, out over the sea and back over the town, dangled by the gusts caught in their upright hair. The children rise and fall, they drift this way and that nodding their heads.

Mr Shipment's youngest child, Little Sorebi, has hair twice as long as the rest, and being the smallest and lightest (despite the weight of her mother's skeleton), she flies the highest. She is more thistle-down and dandelion clock than child. She is more wind-whiffled plastic bag and escaped balloon. She is more UFO.

'Be careful, children,' Mr Shipment calls from the front door steps, the beam of his torch ticking each face in turn, 'hold hands, hold hands, don't let go or Little Sorebi will fly away forever!'

Little Sorebi's hand is tightly clasped by her youngest brother, Byllasub.

'Hold tight, curl your fingers, Little Sorebi,' Byllasub whispers, 'or you'll fly away!'

'And what if I fly away?' says Little Sorebi. 'And what if I do?'

Over the town, back over the sea Mr Shipment's children flutter until Little Sorebi's fingers wriggle free of her brother's grip.

'Whooo hoo,' says the wind, 'I have you now!' And the wind flings Little Sorebi into the night, and hurls her between the two shining moons (one is a reflection) like a tiny nose between two enormous eyes (one of them watery).

The wind fills Little Sorebi's mouth and muffles her shouts. The wind carries Little Sorebi far beyond all exhaled breath and sets her down on the Isle of the Dead with its black basalt cliffs and white, crumbling mists. The wind begins to coil and call out Little Sorebi's soul from her body, but it will not come. Instead, her mother's osseous remnants step down from Little Sorebi's head. Clickety click, clumpety clack.

'Mother's bones!' says Little Sorebi.

'I fetched you here,' says Mrs Shipment, deceased. 'A mother can't be dead and gone whilst standing on her children's heads. It breaks all rules.'

'What rules?'

'They're written on my arms and legs'. And so they were. Little Sorebi could see a curly script in crimson twists around her mother's left-side humerus, hip and femur.

'Like a tattoo,' says Little Sorebi.

'Like an inscription,' says Mother's bones. 'You must bring me back to Life. My body and soul have fallen, bit by bit, into the sea. You must sail the Long Arm Boat and find the sea-eggs in which my soul and my flesh and blood lie. Then you must give them to the Ship's hands to warm and hatch'.

Then Mrs Shipment's bones went and lay down on the black basalt rocks, patting them like a mattress. 'I'll wait here till you get back,' and there she stayed, the mist dripping into her ribcage. And that's where I'll stop. Point made. I'm not a teller of traditional tales. I'm not an oral storyteller. I'm an...?

Oh, and here are some of the images I drew to accompany my stories. The Long Arm Boat has an arm above water like a Viking prow, and an arm beneath water that acts as a sorter, sifter and anchor, even wearing its own Marigold rubber glove to avoid pruning.

