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**Madrigals for a Lost Magnificence:  
An Introduction to Poems from *Many  
Rivers to Cross***

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As familiar as the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” is worldwide, you might not remember exactly how it ends. With the witch shoved into the oven and burnt up, of course, but with the children left to get home from the so-called “gingerbread house” with the treasures they have discovered there. To do so they must get across a “large” river, a river they had not encountered on their way into the forest. There is no bridge, no ferry man to make it easy for them, but there is a white duck they call out to (in verse):

Help us, help us, little duck!  
We're Hansel and Gretel out of luck.  
We can't get over, try as we may,  
Please take us across right away!

The little duck obliges them readily enough, but it is Gretel who has the perception to realize that the duck is too little to carry them--other than one at a time. And so they cross the river and make their way through a forest that grows increasingly familiar,

till they arrive at their father's house to be united with him in "utmost joy" and wealth.<sup>1</sup>

The appearance of a symbolic river-crossing in a fairy tale as incontestably old as "Hansel and Gretel" reveals to us the archetypal nature of this image, and prompts reflection on the frequent occurrence of such an image in the history of cultures around the world. Within just the purview of Western Civilization it harks back to the Biblical story of how the Hebrews must cross the Jordan River in order to reach the Promised Land; or in Greek mythology we might think of how the River Styx separates the land of the living from the land of the dead; and in Roman history there is, of course, the "crossing of the Rubicon" that meant Caesar had made up his mind to march on Rome. When we examine our maps we find that rivers often mark boundaries between nations, as with the Danube in Europe, or in America, between states, as does the mighty Columbia between my native state of Oregon and my home state of Washington.

To cross a river on a symbolic level then, means to make a transition, to enter a new condition of life. For Hansel and Gretel, it means that they have outgrown the demonizing of their mother that comes with the realization that she is not simply a milk (or food) dispensing machine for them to monopolize. For older children a crossing can mean the difference between a life without sexual distinctions (of importance), and a life filled with them, fraught with momentous decisions to be made. For adults a river crossing can symbolize the difference between a comfortable past and a challenging future, as with the pioneers of the American

West making crossing after crossing in their search for new homeland (which recalls an obscure 50s Western that also went by the title of “Many Rivers to Cross”).

I have very consciously chosen “Many Rivers to Cross” as the title of my current book of poetry then, to evoke the perils and thrills, the agonies and triumphs, of the the transitions we make in our progress through life. I did so first, however, with the prompting of two of my favorite songs, which have long had a revolving place in my psyche. One is the old folk ballad “The River is Wide,” the first stanza of which goes like this:

The river is wide, I cannot see  
And neither have I wings to fly.  
Build me a boat that can carry two  
And both shall row, my love and I.

The other song, by Jimmy Cliff, just happens to have the title of “Many Rivers to Cross,” (obviously not any more original with him as it is with me). A big hit back in 1972, the opening verses go like this:

Many rivers to cross  
But I can't seem to find my way over.  
Wandering I am lost  
As I travel along the white cliffs of Dover.

Many rivers to cross  
And it's only my will that keeps me alive.  
I've been licked, washed up for years  
And I only survive because of my pride.

And this loneliness won't leave me alone,  
 It's such a drag to be on your own,  
 My woman left me and she didn't say why,  
 And I guess--I'll have to cry.

In both songs the river or rivers represent the obstacles we encounter in the perpetual journey that is our life. We envision an ultimate “promised land,” or garden of heavenly bliss, that we could inhabit in the company of our true love. But not infrequently there is one too many rivers to cross for the lovers to stay together, and they are left stranded on opposite shores of an impassable flood.

These images resonated deeply in the circumstances of my personal life, and as they did so they began to assume a wider meaning for me in the fields of my intellectual life. For they reveal how profoundly our individual existence is connected to the mythic life we have lived as human beings from the beginning of time. In recent centuries, following the Scientific Revolution of the late Renaissance era (starting with the *De Revolutionibus* of Copernicus in 1543), we have increasingly become dedicated to finding a rational explanation for all phenomena in this world.<sup>2</sup> This reason, or logos, as the Greeks called it, has enabled us to seize hold of creation and shake out more of its treasures than anyone from even 50 years ago could possibly have imagined. Gods, spirits, ghosts, demons, monsters, elves, or fairies are no longer needed to explain anything that occurs within the realms of the universe. Myths have little relevance for us, except as a source book of names for the technological wonders we spew out into space or

aim at hostile ethnicities across a border. Myths we retain, such as those of Santa Claus and the Christ child, of Halloween and demonic beings, are kept around for nostalgic reasons in support of traditions that allow us to indulge in commercial excesses of one kind or another. They no longer affect us on a personally significant level. They are devoid of meaning, except for children. The reality we face is a reality without shadows, a reality without mysteries, a reality under control. The answer to every question is a mouse click away in this age when information technology reigns supreme.

And yet there is another river to cross. The river we may well see in our dreams. It may be that because the gate to my home is just a few steps from the edge of a river, and that this river so generally benign, becomes with heavy rain a muddy torrent of some capacity and depth, but I have many a dream about rivers. And I know I am not the only one. This came strikingly to my attention several years ago when Billy Joel released a CD album that he called "River of Dreams." The title cut goes in part like this:

In the middle of the night / I go walking in my dreams  
From the mountains of faith / To a river so deep.  
I must be looking for something / Something sacred I lost  
But the river is wide / And it's too hard to cross.

And even though I know the river is wide  
I walk down every evening and I stand on the shore  
And try to cross to the opposite side  
So I can finally find out what I've been looking for.

In the middle of the night / I go walking in my sleep  
Through the valley of fear / To a river so deep.  
And I've been searching for something / Taken out of my soul  
Something I would never lose / Something somebody stole.

The song continues further on with these lines: "Baptized by the fire / I wade into the river / That runs to the promised land."

It is not just in myths and legends, or songs and poems then, that we encounter the image of river-crossing, but in our dreams. This indicates that "the river of life" is an image that is integral to human consciousness. It will never lose its appeal to us because we experience life as a fluid condition, and we thirst for life just as equally, in the form of fluids and freedom. This conjunction of associations helps us to close in on the essential idea of archetypal images and their origins in our collective unconscious--to use the Jungian term. Dreams well up from the darkest depths of the unconscious mind carrying all the imagery of the life that teems around us, and presenting us with vignettes and stories in a picture language that we must puzzle our way through. From these glimpses of the deepest layers of psychic reality come the images that fill our art--whether as music, paintings, poetry, or fiction. What we have been able to rationally figure out during daytime hours does not figure in the nighttime world. What figures is everything that has gone unresolved, everything that has sunk below the level of consciousness because it is difficult, unpleasant, or frightening. We try to avoid this material in our waking moments, in order to carry on with the business of whatever enterprise we happen to be engaged in, but the moment

our mental guard is down, out this material leaps in all manner of guises and masks, often leaving us amazed, terrified, or simply perplexed. Not until we hear or see the echo of those images in art do we have a chance to come to terms with how they manifest themselves in our own individual lives. Thus the absolute necessity for the arts in all their diversity. We need help. We need guidance along the path of life, otherwise we end up going around and around in endless circles, asking the forever adolescent question (as in the theme song of the classic movie, “Alfie”), “What’s it All About?”

In “Alfie” (originally 1966, with Michael Caine, and remade in 2004 with Jude Law) the title character tries to find what it’s all about by going from one woman to the next, incapable of making or keeping any sort of commitment, and nicely encapsulating a mode of life that was much celebrated in the heyday of *Playboy* and hedonism. Feminism, however, has since come and gone, leading to a reassessment of the the female and the feminine in all aspects of life, including religion. Archaeologists in the last several decades, most preeminently Marija Gimbutas, have dug deeply into the European past and discovered the universal presence of the Mother Goddess in any number of animal and vegetable variations. So-called “Venus” figurines from the Neolithic age (from roughly 10,000 years B.C.E. to 3000 B.C.E.) show figures massively swollen with child, or with legs and buttocks puffed out like eggs. Other figurines depict bird-like or frog-like women, with the pubic triangle clearly delineated, or even more startlingly with the vulva graphically presented.<sup>3</sup> Human beings put fertility first in

the form of the mother, because fertility was the preeminent value in an age when no one could possibly understand biological generation. Thus, thousands of years before the rise of monotheistic religions with their single patriarchal god came to dominate both the Old and New Worlds, human beings made a goddess of life, celebrating birth, accepting the inevitability of death, and anticipating rebirth back into this world. This was as true for old Europe (pre-Aryan) as it was for any other people on the face of the earth.

I bring these matters up in passing merely to illuminate how my studies in these areas have influenced much of the material that makes up this collection of poems. Much of my work as a poet, and as a writer of fiction previous to the dawn of the 21st century, has been concerned with my own transitions as a boy growing into manhood. There was much for me to resolve in my relationships to my father, my three brothers, and finally to my four sons. But as a professor at an all-women's college it also behooved me to turn my attention to the task girls face in growing into womanhood. Teaching the reading and analysis of fairy tales, generally from a Jungian perspective in the manner of Maria Louise von Franz, has enabled me to delve ever deeper into both the divine and the mundane aspects of the feminine.<sup>4</sup> To understand most of the stories about girls in the Brothers Grimm collection, for example, we must keep in mind the neurobiological impact of menarche (the first period of menstruation) on a girl's entire being, knowing now as we do, precisely the kind of hormonal changes that revolutionize the body in adolescence.<sup>5</sup> Not



that fairy tales reference this directly, but by use of the kind of archetypal images myths are constructed from, we can find associations with the moon, with birds, with furry beasts and creepy crawlers, not to mention flowers and trees, all in service to the fact that the sexless girl must get used to the idea of being sexual, of having the distinction, supreme as it long has been, of one day becoming a life-giver.

My attention has thus shifted dramatically with the passing of time from the complex of emotions that we associate with Freud and his Oedipus, to what I take as the much more primary complex, that of the Mother, as Jung and his followers have increasingly brought to the forefront.<sup>6</sup> My studies of Ernest Hemingway's life and work, among many other authors, has brought to my attention the incontrovertible fact that boys, as do girls, must deal with mother first, and after the first years of attachment and identification, find a way to build a healthy ego outside the power of her gravitational pull.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the goddess that everyone's mother is initially must give way to a recognition of the goddess we find in all manifestations of life, whether we include aspects of religious worship in that or not.

I do. And many of the poems I have worked on for this collection reflect my recognition of this divine life force in and around me. I recognize it as the prompter and instigator of life itself, and as a presence within both men and women that works towards acceptance and reconciliation. The ultimately transcendent power that rules over this universe I am content to call the Great Spirit, in keeping with the inspiration of American Indians. But

that is more a necessary abstraction than not. What manifests itself in form comes from and is shaped irrevocably by the divinely feminine.

The poems themselves are formed in three stanzas of seven lines each, making 21 lines. The structure of three units reminds me of the three strokes of the pen that make up the character of river in Chinese and Japanese. Three is the magic number in fairy tales, representing the three-phased nature of time, as well as the three-part structure of the life process in man/woman/child. In the depiction of triangles this aspect of life's sacred triad is a feature of all pre-historic goddess figurines. Seven lines to a stanza reminds us of the week, the four weeks corresponding to the four phases of the moon, perhaps the most obvious of feminine symbols known to mankind.<sup>8</sup> 21 itself, of course, is the age of majority in the Western world, and it means we are on our way, free and independent, and most importantly, totally responsible for ourselves, and whatever fix we may happen to find ourselves in. So that I think of these poems as being a way to explore the person I have become, rather than the person I was once in the process of becoming. In a series of 30 sonnets in my second collection of poems, *Borne Away*, I set out deliberately to trace that path from childhood to young manhood. Now with my own children having reached their 20s, I have been inspired to take a look around my world with fresh eyes, and to see it as it truly is, divine in all its being.

It has long been my dream to write such a series, beginning I think with my early encounter with the 21-line poem of the 16th

century poet Sir Thomas Wyatt, called after its opening line, “They Flee from Me That Sometime Did Me Seek.” That line alone has always spoken to me of my own varied success in pursuit of love, but in conveying this with wit and charm, Wyatt entertains and delights, while being uninhibited in his erotic imagery. At the same time, though the poem is crafted in three stanzas of rhyme royal (seven pentameter lines rhyming ababbcc) there are numerous and startling irregularities in the beat and syllable count that hint at something more tolerant and modern.

I have chosen to refer to this form as a “madrigal.” Which the dictionary in part defines as “A short poem, often about love, suitable to being set to music.”<sup>9</sup> Well, mine are neither short, nor all that suitable to being sung, but they do evoke the maternal, and that, it turns out to be, is the etymological origin of the word *madrigal*, going all the way back to *mater* in Latin. Which also happens to be where the word “material” sprouts from. Nothing is coincidental!

#### Notes

- 1) Quotations from “Hansel and Gretel” are from Jack Zipes translation, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (New York: Bantam Book, third edition, 2003), pp. 53-58.
- 2) For an insightful account of the Scientific Revolution see Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991), pp.248-271.
- 3) I have relied on the last of her many publications: Marija Gimbutas (as edited and supplemented by Miriam Robbins Dexter), *The Living Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- 4) There are many works on fairy tales by von Franz, but the most

- basic, and the one I use in my classes, is Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Boston: Shambala, revised edition, 1996).
- 5) I have consulted a number of books on the recent advances in the study of human neurobiology, the most useful of which, when it comes to girls, is Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain* (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2006).
  - 6) I am particularly indebted to the works of Erich Neumann, especially *The Great Mother* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), as well as those of Robert A. Johnson, including *Lying with the Heavenly Woman* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).
  - 7) Hemingway's problems with his mother, and the repercussions of the way he was raised as a twin to his elder sister, have been much discussed in recent years, beginning with the biography by Kenneth S. Lynn, *Hemingway* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); and in excruciating detail by Mark Spilka, *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1990).
  - 8) My discussion of these symbolic numbers owes much to Gimbutas, and to Joseph Campbell, especially the essay, "The Mystery Number of the Goddess" found in *The Mythic Dimension* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2008).
  - 9) This definition is from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

**Age of Fables**

You wander to the edge of the lake and leap in  
Expecting to drown, but it's too shallow and  
You end up wading all the way out  
To a wooded isle. Some maiden's singing there,  
You don't know why, but you recognize the tune  
From the eighteenth century--it's an old  
English ballad of shipwreck and loss, but it's not

For you she sings, but some person you aren't.  
You look back to shore but it isn't there, and  
You're shoving off for a distant world, a more  
Promising clime. Now you must climb up  
Into the shrouds and man the crow's nest. You're on  
A whaling ship bound across the Pacific  
For the waters off the hermit kingdom

Of Japan. Round the Cape of Storms you'll have  
To pass. Far beyond the sight of land  
Is enough to know you must put your faith  
In something other than dumb luck. Hazards  
Only increase the farther you voyage  
Into the fabrications of fabulists.  
But how else is the treasure to be found?

**Shadow Play**

The shadows of falling petals, not the petals  
Themselves as they fall, but what's left behind  
For the sun to project in the tossing air and leave  
All scattered about in the ellipsis of spring--  
This awful aftermath of the urge to flower,  
This remains with me now: the flickering of light,  
The back and forth of it, the fantasia of it,

As the ideal world retreats and becomes  
The pure potential of next year: to fall  
In love with such insubstantiality,  
To say, "You mean everything to me," when  
Truly it is the absence of light that she was,  
And not the beauty itself, no, never the beauty  
Itself, for what would that be, that substance

But something fulfilled, and thus too finished,  
Too much achieved; it is this passing  
I love and nothing else; and really actually  
Less than that: the shadow of passing, the  
Unconsumed existence of an illusion before  
My eyes, a show of what's not there and will  
Never be again--all in the sunlight air.

**The Old Animal**

I wake up with my head pillowed against  
The flank of my horse where he has fallen  
On our long journey home; and so I continue  
On foot having acquired a dog whom I love  
As I would a brother; his fur is long and thick  
And his coloring black and white and blond,  
A collie crossed with a wolf, fittingly fierce

When traversing the dark forests, where lions  
Come out to close a circle around us!  
Suddenly there is laughter and the beasts  
Turn away from the embers that are my eyes.  
And now a woman is beside me, radiant of gaze,  
And noble of bearing; and taking my arm we walk  
Down into town, and neither are we turned away,

But greeted with respect, and bowed to even;  
And when she leaves me, my queen, I am alone  
On a high bluff, with a valley between me  
And the shining mountains beyond. I recognize  
The river below--it is the one I always see  
In my dreams, more powerful for being so composed,  
It's source unknown, its flow unceasing.

**Character Study**

There's a reason we love the desert where  
Life can be so rare, and flowers are revealed  
By a sudden shower, so briefly we are sure  
To miss their display, for timing is all  
And all is what we do not have, being  
All too human as we are, demanding ever more  
On our return. I keep cactus in my summer home

And delight to see them bulking up in years  
As unperturbed as stones, though sensitive to  
Too much care, the over-watered grave of love.  
But I project a need where there is none  
And suffer the consequence. This is the way  
I was born, I explain to my everything  
After she's said "Enough"--first with subtlety

And then with a scream! I've tried restraint,  
Holding back, but I came up blank, miserable  
And flat--a fake. Your character is fate,  
And fate decrees a desert thrives with less,  
As does her heart, so barren and constrained.  
Some rocks are meant to lie there, and when  
They're overturned they aren't any less stone.



**Piety**

Unpredictable weather and the wind  
Like my mood always changing direction  
So clouds move swiftly or mass ominously  
And there is the heat of the sun one moment  
And downpours the next, and as soon as umbrellas  
Collapse you`re putting on shades.  
There`s a freshening in the air, a clearing

In the mind, and resentments disappear  
As if they had no cause; frustrations are  
Foregone in the glistening of leaves, the flirtations  
Of girls as they move so briskly about you  
In their ruffled skirts and sleek stockings,  
Smiling indulgently, their hair so alluringly long....  
When turning to a window you see it there

Arching from here to neverland, a rainbow  
In the morning air, and beneath it  
The distant peaks newly dusted with snow!  
And confirmed in joy you feel, elevated  
To a privileged position above it all  
As if nothing will ever have to matter more  
Than this brief moment nearer to heaven.

*for Professor Toru Sugino*

**Less than More**

However I misconstrue the past it is you  
Who cannot be tidied away, you who  
Comes back to me in the foreshortened days,  
The falling leaves of the season when I last  
Entertained hopes of someone who`d understand  
This other being I am when I turn to the page  
And write. In front of others I can be anyone

I choose, it doesn`t seem to matter, and loving that  
You strung along for a while waiting on some  
Other performance I couldn`t give. I wanted  
To be read, you see, I wanted to be delved into,  
Compelling your fascination with my inner life.  
But you did not want to see into anything deeper  
Than a shop window. And you know, I can

Understand. I love the surface sheen no less--  
It`s just that I must convert it into an emblem  
Of something more! It is this *more* I thrive on,  
This *more* that leaks from my pen; the very pen  
You gave me to honor the feeling we shared--  
Oh, so briefly one autumn day when ginkgo leaves  
Still hung in golden splendor upon the tree.

**The Germ of It All**

After the rains come on, the autumn sinks in  
And you feel migratory, anxious to get moving  
To some place closer to the sun, and start in  
On the winter count. All summer long there was  
Plenty to pursue, but when the cold arrives  
You need to be centered around the fire, to swap  
Stories, tell your favorite lies. Nature turns

Against the open life, and companionship is wanted,  
If not with people, then with the past: Deeper  
Into the dreamtime of forebears and their rites--  
Of the hunt, of love, and death--searching for  
The sign of the indwelling source in the wearing  
Down of landscapes, of yourselves, where artifacts  
Break into the light of uncommon eyes. So age

Makes compact with youth. How clear in the end  
The way we`re all caught up in it--so to be  
Born again is as natural as the prodigality  
Of winged seeds taking off in the gusting wind.  
Looking into the fire you see the germ of it all  
In the combustion of the elements fixing  
To burn their way into the immortal sky.