

JANE MCKIE

Baba Yaga in the Grand Canyon

The Cariboo Road

They keep coming, the empty-handed, with just one more shrew-sized question, its answer unravelling another year of Baba Yaga's life.

They leave their hunger on the snow of her skin—a bluer vein, year of lines advancing on her centre.

She is a wise woman. Surely she can boil up another brew of roses to sift like lilac cabbages

in the hot swill of her samovar? Her own medicine. The answer is clear. Leave this place. Don't grieve forever.

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From New Westminster to Yale,
from Yale to Quesnel:
after Alaska, this is a rush of gold,
a skein of wheel-ruts and waterways,
trail of melded nights and days
that never once feels wearisome.

Her palms itch with preludes.

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Baba Yaga Confesses to the Colorado River

Stifled in her size zero fleece, hidebound
by magic, Baba Yaga goat-steps
the theatre of umbers
down to the distant basin.

After kicking off her walking boots,
she stands where the Colorado River is shallow,
candle-flamed by brack and flicker,
thinking back until she cannot bear to think.

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The river whispers:

Swap your birch for Chihuahua pines.
Look, here are trees with fat buttery berries,

a berry-red sun roasts the Grand Canyon's skull.
Grandmother, forget your cupboard love

of captured children, give up your keyhole
of icicle teeth, the bone staves

encircling your chicken-legged hut.
Stop under these generous cliffs,

let them eat you with their light.

She says: I have grown up.
I have grown old.

She says: I have nurtured.
I have murdered.

The river says: Let go of the orphan stones in your pocket.
Unlace your spine. Follow me. Where I go

there are no contradictions.

The Compassionate Thief

Pink pebbles at the river's bottom
give Baba Yaga as much pleasure
as children stolen from their beds.

She sieves them, non-committal
prospector, tips them back in.
Sieves them, tips them back in.

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A late summer storm approaches.
She welcomes the cast of the sky
as it shifts again, thunderclouds
scaled in CinemaScope.

Secreted between shelves
of rock and more rock, blue lupine
and Indian paintbrush. Wild turkeys.
Tarantulas on the high flats.

All the horizontals make her dizzy.
When summer lightning hits,
her feet run from the river's forgiveness,
propelled by spidery rhythms.

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The Motherless Province

A hundred questions wake in the witch,
jump from trees to hector in a Slavic tongue
she can no longer make any sense of.

She shifts her tatters of sleep fitfully,
tries to believe in the soft motel bed.

*

Come, wake up the children.

A wolf hangs his head, digs in the compact
snow for frozen crumbs of blood. Another
has his neck in a yoke, ready to serve,
but there is no mistress, no alpha beast
to measure himself against. Trees are milk
on one side, coal on the other. The moon,
on the cusp, holds up the old world order,
presides over a stopgap parliament.

Between the trees, a chaos of boulders
are flint-faced crouching men. The empty-ones
gather, wait with the rocks for their mother.
When the moon sets, she will surely return.

Baba Yaga, The Bone Leg

The squat box from America
is an enigma:
no windows, no doors,
raised up on four fowl feet.
No foraging animal
can get a snout in.

When they lift the roof—
an apparition of ashes
so aghast
the snow-blind sky blinks.

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There has to be one

to stand sentry,
to be a signpost,
to be a lamp

when there are no more enemies,
no more miles,
no more sights.

Just one sentinel. Char-white.

A kind of finishing line.