The Beast Room

DOROTHY THOMAS

The woman unlocked the door and pushed the child ahead of her into the attic room. She held the candle just above the child’s head. “You will sleep here,” she said.

At first in the dim light the child could see only the bed. It was a large bed, like a heap of gray wool held in place by the four posts. Then the child saw that this room was like no other room she had ever seen. It was a beast room. Beasts stood all about the bed and crouched in the shadows beyond it. The candlelight shone in their eyes and glistened on their yellow fangs and their red tongues. The child turned and threw herself against the woman crying, “Take me away! Take me away!” Her nails bit into the soft flesh of the woman’s arms and hurt and angered her.

“Don’t be a fool,” the woman said. “They told me at the Home that you were sickly, that your heart was queer, but they didn’t tell me you were a fool. These beasts can’t hurt you. They are dead. They are stuffed with clay, and rags and cotton. Their own bones are in their legs. An old man, my husband’s uncle, stuffed them. He is dead now. He died three days ago in this very bed. We buried him yesterday.”

The woman squatted down and set the candle on the floor between two wolves. She tapped the tongue and the eyes of one of the wolves with the key she held in her hand. “See,” she said, “their tongues are made of wax and their eyes are glass balls. What is the matter with you? Do you think the animals will want to eat you? Don’t stand there shaking. You look as thin and weak as a cat.” She turned in the doorway and shook her keys at the child. “Undress and get into bed!” she said sharply. “Your light is almost gone.”

After the child heard the key turn in the lock she stood a long time looking at the beasts without moving. The low light turned the throats and the bellies of the beasts to tawny yellow and threw long wavering shadows on the rafters. Beyond the wolves were other larger beasts: a lean cat-like creature, a great dog, a goat, a fawn that had no head, and a black bear that had reared up on its haunches. She felt
THE PRAIRIE SCHOONER

terribly alone among all these dead things that were playing at being alive. All of them were looking at her with their hard shining eyes. For a long time she did not move. Perhaps, if she stood still long enough they would think she was dead, like one of themselves, and take their eyes away from her. At last she began slowly to undress without looking at what she was doing. She fumbled at the buttons of her clothes with cold fingers. She dared not look away from the beasts. They seemed to be growing more alive. Their tongues seemed to become a deeper red. Their noses looked damp as though they had begun to breathe. If she should grow faint and close her eyes they would be there beside her. After they had looked at her a long, long time they would leap upon her and eat her.

Perhaps the woman had lied. Perhaps the animals had never been dead. Perhaps the woman was a witch who had enchanted them and hidden them here in this long, dark room. It might be that she had been brought here from the Home to be eaten by the beasts. She would be brave, as brave as a princess in a wood. When she had put on her night gown she would go to each of the beasts and touch them. She would know for certain whether they were dead or alive. She would go first to the bear. He alone stood upright. She must not let him see that she was trembling. His head was thrust forward and his paws hung in front of him. He was like an old man. He was like the evil old man who had hidden himself in the arbor and frightened the big girls at the Home. She wrapped her gown about her and went to him quickly and put her hand to his face. She touched with her fingertips his cold round eyes and his tongue. He was indeed dead, but his fur was warm.

To know that the bear was dead was not enough. She must make sure of all the other beasts. She must touch them, every one. She went quickly from beast to beast, touching the eyes and the mouths of each. They were every one dead and cold. At the far end of the room she found a tall cupboard with glass doors. It was full of great birds. Their beaks were hooked and their claws were long and twisted. She had not known that God had made such cruel and ugly birds. They looked even more alive than the beasts. She
THE BEAST ROOM

wanted to open the doors and touch them too but the latch was so high that she could not reach it.

She looked back toward the candle and the bed. The little heap that was her clothes, her two shoes, and the stub of candle in the saucer, seemed a great way off. The gray bed looked soft and beautiful. It did not seem that an old man could have died in it. So many beasts stood between her and the gray bed. To know that they were dead had helped only while she was touching them. They had grown cruel and terrible again. She wondered how she had ever dared to walk among them, to touch them with her hands. Their shadows were more terrible than the beasts themselves. Their shadows climbed, and groped, and clawed among the rafters. The beasts might be dead, as dead as the woman had said they were, as dead as she had made herself believe when she touched them, but their shadows were alive, as alive and terrible as beasts seen in a dream.

A new fear caught at her, a fear so sharp and terrible that she could not think or see. She caught her gown about her and ran blindly and leaped upon the bed. She slid in between the blankets and lay still without breathing.

This was a feather bed. It was not at all like the firm little mattress on which she had slept in the Home. She began to turn from side to side to look at the beasts. With each movement she sank deeper into the bed. Her hair was damp on her forehead. One of her braids fell across her throat as she turned. The hairs caught and clung to her flesh, like fingers.

The light wavered. There was almost nothing left of the candle. The child was not used to candlelight. She had not thought that the light might fail her. The candle was almost all burned away. Now there was nothing left but the little black stem of the wick standing in a pool of tallow. The flame shook like a yellow leaf in a wind. It turned from yellow to pale blue, grew taller and thinner, and was gone. The wick burned red for a moment and then it, too, was gone. Then the darkness swept down over her in waves that were measured by the beating in her ears. She could see nothing but the four gray squares that made the little window.

Her lips were dry. She tried to wet them with her tongue but it, too, was dry and heavy. She tried to cry out but there was no voice in her throat.

245
THE PRAIRIE SCHOONER

Now she heard a sound, the sound of something soft moving across the floor toward the bed. Surely something had moved and for the length of two heart beats, blotted out the small gray squares of the window. The sound was like lamed feet walking in a familiar place. Perhaps it was the old man who has stuffed the animals. Had he come for her to stuff her with clay and cotton, to punish her for sleeping in the bed where he had died? No, that could not be, for he was not only dead but buried. He was far away in a grove. He could not come back. It must be the animals who had moved. They were dead, but they had not been buried. Now that the light was gone they had come alive again. They were walking with their soft feet all about her bed. She raised herself on her elbows the better to listen. She could hear them now, the pat of their soft feet in the dust on the floor. She felt them near. A small beast clambered up on the end of the bed and sat there, a heavier lump of blackness in the gloom. She could feel its breathing along the bed. All the beasts were closing in about her. She felt their breath on her face and her throat. She could see farther through the darkness now. She could see the shapes of the beasts. They were no longer as they had been while the candle burned. They had taken the shapes of their shadows. They had grown tall and terrible, and alive, alive as only beasts seen in a dream know how to be alive. They stood looking at her, trembling and hideous. The bear alone had eyes that she could see. His eyes were no longer bright and glistening. They were like two smooth gray stones seen under moving water. The bear came toward her, swaying tremblyingly from side to side. He was the bear, and yet he was an evil old man as well. He was the old man who had frightened the girls in the arbor. None of the beasts had touched her, but the bear would touch her. He would lay his paws upon her throat. The underside of his paws would be smooth and moist. He came to the side of the bed and stood looking down at her. His eyes were not always there. They could go like lights and come again. Now she could see his wet mouth and his trembling paws. She could no longer look at him. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again the bear was moving away from the bed. He was moving slowly toward the end of the room, toward
The Beast Room

the cupboard that held the birds. She wanted to cry out, to stop him, but her tongue clung to the roof of her mouth. She drew it free with a little clicking sound. Or was it her tongue that clicked? It was the latch! It was the latch that un-fastened the doors of the cupboard. The bear had opened the doors. He had let out the wicked birds. The darkness came again with such heaviness that she could not even see the shapes of the beasts about her. The room was filled with the sound of wings. At first they seemed a great way off and then they swept over her, whirring, pounding wings, that filled the room and beat down upon her. She had no strength to fight against them. The wings, and the darkness that was heavy as dust pressed against her, choking her, smothering her. They pressed upon her eyes and her throat and her breast so that she could no longer breathe. She flung out her arms and gasped for air. But there was no air.

THE SPIRIT OF DUST

RUSSELL TRUE PRESCOTT

Pale dust that has lain
Beneath this house so long,
Greet light and winds, dust,
Greet sun and rain.

Greet the clouds and sunset,
Greet life again,
Greet love and live roots,
Feel creative pain.

Never lost is your spirit, dust,
On the citied hill, in the hollow —
Gone for an age, perhaps, then must
Glad renascence follow.

247