

# Excerpts from *The Boghole and the Beldame*



*Joanna Ruocco*

## **The Donkey and the Bear**

I eat leeks with the beldame. I drink juice with the beldame, the juice of the leeks. When we finish, we sit on the stump without eating or drinking. I throw our bowls and cups into the boghole and the bearded bottoms of the leeks. A thief approaches the boghole. "Sometimes the night is full of sounds," says the beldame, "and there is no room for the sounds of a thief approaching. But tonight the night is empty of sounds and we may listen to the thief's approach." I listen. I hear the braying of a donkey and the growling of a bear. "The sounds of the thief approaching are stealthy sounds," says the beldame, "if attributed to the thief. Otherwise the sounds are common enough." I feel heat on the back of my neck, but I do not know to what I should attribute this heat: to the breath of donkey, bear, or thief. I turn my head to the side and the breath passes beneath my nose. The breath is redolent of leeks. "Yes," says the beldame. "Beyond the village of the shambles, I descended the dell. I came to a house. The light from the house spilled into the dell. I found the casements of the window thrown open, the crib pushed to the window, the child asleep in the crib." The night is silent. A lamp

has floated to the top of the boghole. Fen-berries float in the light of the lamp.

### **The Valley of Josef**

The valley of Josef is a narrow valley, the slopes too steep for sheep to graze peaceably. The grazing of sheep in the valley of Josef is a mighty feat, a feat of a mightiness not common to sheep. The sheep in the valley of Josef are prized for their mightiness, but they know no peace and their lives are short. The young men of the valley of Josef live among sheep. They wear robes, ungirt to reveal their thighs, which shine with the oils of the wool. Their feet are unshod. Their heels are hard as the hooves of sheep. One road runs through the valley of Josef. The road is the width of a dung-cart. If the drivers of the dung-carts wish to lie with the young men of the valley of Josef they stop their carts on the road. There are no trees to shade the road so it does not matter where on the road they stop. The road that runs through the valley of Josef is the same road in all of its parts; it has no features—no dips, bends, grades, ruts, growths—or rather, its features are everywhere the same features. Stopping the dung-carts on the road is no different from driving the dung-carts on the road. The drivers of the dung-carts might as well stop their carts to lie with the young men of the valley of Josef, even if at first it is not what they wish. Lying with the young men of the valley of Josef is the only difference between stopping and driving the dung-carts. Without this one difference, the drivers of the dung-carts would never know if they were leaving or remaining in the valley of Josef. The dung in their carts is intended for the orchards of the Fane. The drivers cannot discharge their duty by dunging the road that runs through the valley of Josef and so emptying their carts; they must continue towards the Fane. The dung in the carts does not burn the windborne seeds that settle. Lush grasses and fruit trees grow from the dung in the carts. Each cart contains an orchard. The valley of Josef does not differ from the Fane in any way. The road through each is the same. The orchards are the same. The valley of Josef cannot be confused with the Fane. The young men who live in the valley wear no sandals. They worship nothing but sheep.

## Zucchini Flower

“The axe-head moon in the zucchini flower season,” says the beldame, “brings the beldame.” “The skin prickles in this season,” I say, “but the blood is stagnant. The skin does not redden. The moonlight is long and yellow. The eyes film. The lips grow together at the corners so speech involves the tearing of the lips.” “In sleep,” says the beldame, “the beldame crouches on your chest. For every sleeper, a beldame, crouching.” “On this stump,” I say, “I am afraid to sleep. Asleep, I may roll into the boghole. I do not sleep,” I say, “but you crouch upon me.” “Only in speech do we tear apart,” says the beldame, “but the tearing produces a glue, a serum that adheres us more closely.” Beneath the smell of leeks, the yellow smell of this serum, thinner than the smell of rotting. It must be a thin smell, otherwise it would not fit between my body and the body of the beldame. Our skins are as the seam between lips.

## The Girl and the Boy

I make a tube of hide and fit it with a lens. I train the tube across the boghole. There, on the other side of the boghole, a girl with a jar. “If her jar is made of optic glass,” says the beldame, “and she holds it to her eye, she may see you motioning from the stump, but she will see you only as a figure of miasma, for everyone knows that miasma forms figures that beckon to young girls, coaxing them towards fever.” The girl does not hold her jar to her eye. She dips her jar into the boghole. “In the village of the shambles they drink a certain tea,” says the beldame, “cultured with liquid from the boghole. The girl comes to the boghole to gather liquid for this tea.” I turn the tube and look away from the boghole across the stump. There, on the other side of the stump, a boy with a saw. “If he had arrived earlier,” says the beldame, “he might have felled this tree and built a ship large enough to move his village across the sea, but he has arrived late and the tree has disappeared into the boghole. He will not build a ship to move his village and the villagers will die in the chasm that even now opens beneath the village.” I throw hide and lens into the boghole and run from the beldame, across the stump, towards the boy. Soon I am back at the beldame, led to her by the rings of the stump.

## Pancake Bell

Each villager is waiting her turn to climb the tower and ring the pancake bell, but not the mason and the cartwright. They are fishing in the river. The mason fishes with a peacock herl and the cartwright fishes with a peach flower. Both peacock herls and peach flowers ride the currents of the water. The mason believes that peacock herls are more toothsome to fish, and the cartwright believes that peach flowers are more toothsome to everything. The cartwright dips her hand often into her pouch of peach flowers and drops flowers into her mouth. "The rocks in the river have grown larger," says the mason. "It must be that the water is lower," says the cartwright. "Quantities of water may vary in a river, but rocks only dwindle. This is the way of rocks." The mason fishes. The cartwright fishes. Herl and flower ride the waters. "The fish are insensible to pleasure," says the cartwright. "They desire neither herl nor flower." The lines spool on and on, carried by the river. "The rocks may have displaced the fish," says the mason. "The capacities of rivers are limited and so the ratios of fish to rock relate inversely." "The peach flower has grounded on a rock," says the cartwright. "Earlier the rock did not break the surface of the water, but now the rock rises above the water, like an islet." The mason and the cartwright look about. The understory presses against both sides of the river. "When the water is low, two silver lines bank the river," says the mason, "the clay of the river-bottom silvering upon contact with the air." Ferns bend over the river and the long tops of wild onions and spotted lilies. "There are no silver lines," admits the cartwright. "The water runs high and sweet with the snowmelt. But it is a strange thing to encounter rocks that act contrary to their nature, growing instead of dwindling in the river." "It must be that the rocks are snails," says the mason. "Great snails from ages past who found their way into the river through tunnels in the earth." "They have eaten the fish," says the cartwright. "Yes," says the mason. "They grow fat on fish. This is the way of snails." "If we wade deeper in the river, we can use our arms as levers and lever out a snail," says the cartwright. The mason and the cartwright tie the ends of their lines to the hornbeam. The cartwright empties the pouch of peach flowers into her mouth. The mason and the cartwright enter the river. They crouch to lever the snail and the

water runs over the tops of their shoulders and chills even the long chin of the cartwright. It smells faintly of peaches.

### **Figures of Miasma**

How I do not block the wind. Yes, says the beldame. How water falls through my hands. Yes, says the beldame. How when I lie on your breast, I am the color of your breast, I am the shape of your breast, I am long and white like your breast. Yes, says the beldame. You are my breast. I am your breast. You are my breast, says the beldame, when you lie on my breast. When I lie on the stump, I am the stump. When I wade in the bog, I am the bog. Do not wade in the bog, says the beldame. She hangs her feet in the bog. Jars float in the bog. She unscrews the lid of a jar with her feet. The wind sings in the jar, says the beldame, the jar sings in the wind. How when I fill I will sink. I will sing, says the beldame. The night is too dark to hear. The skin is too close to touch. Yes, says the beldame, I feel your breath on my breast.

### **Cream of Lettuce**

A man arrives at the village of hubbard. He is carrying a pot and has black whiskers on his face. When he reaches the center of the village, he bangs on his pot and the women of the village of hubbard come to greet him with kisses, but the man's black whiskers are stiff as wires and closely rooted in his cheeks; the women find no space for their lips to rest peaceably. The man lowers his brows, long and stiff as his whiskers, so the women fear to kiss even his nose. I search for the demon of kell, says the man. Where might you search for such a demon in our village? ask the women. In the village of kell, says the man, the demon dwelled in a red-thorn bush as tall as a tree. I might search for the demon in such a bush in your village. We have such a bush, say the women. We pruned the red-thorn branches after the dew dried, say the women, to make our red-thorn garlands. We did not find the demon of kell among the thorns. The man sees that red thorns garland the heads of the women. The demon of kell in the red-thorn bush did not look unlike many women,

brown limbs, and above, red-thorns between long drapes of hair. The man overturns his pot and sits heavily upon its base. He looks up at the women. I search no more, he says. You must search a little more, say the women. It may be that your demon dwells in our lettuces, which grow just beyond those stones.

## **Jasper**

The path, though green, is not grass but jasper. The river, though blue, is not water but lazuli. The sky, though clear, is not ether but quartzite. And the women, says the beldame, are they onyx or salt? Yellow fluids run from the scalls of the beldame. Between scalls, coarse grains of skin. I touch the coarse grains of the beldame. I say, salt. Yes, says the beldame. The women are salt. They were mined from the mountain. The miners marked the path to the river with women, one woman for every fork in the path. How many forks in the path to the river? I count the grains of the beldame. As many as grains. Yes, says the beldame. The women point the way to the river. You can't lose your way, says the beldame, but you will not reach the river. You will reach another woman pointing yet farther down the forking path.

## **Wheat Porridge**

"Do not marry," says the beldame. "In the village of the Herm, they strew the bridegroom with fruits, but the bride they chase through fields, until she is treed and bayed and dragged to earth. They strip her. They lash her wrists and ankles around a pole and bear her to the Herm where she is laid upon an oiled stone and packed with hot wheat porridge. Before the porridge, she receives two reeds, one in either nostril, and her skin is cooled with flasks of river water; but even so," says the beldame, "the bride does not find the hours gladsome. She is held to the stone until the porridge dries and can be cut from her. She is given olives to eat. Her hair is perfumed and braided. The Herm is heavy stones. In the course of a day, the weight of the stones presses the earth like a grape so that the dusk flows from the earth, the dark, sweet dusk. It pools around the

Herm and slowly the fields darken, the trunks of the trees darken, the hills darken. The darkness crests the hills, and the sky darkens, and the bride begins to enjoy the dusk. She stands by the Herm and feels swift movements in the dark air: nighthawks, bats, moths, thick cinders from the fires. Beside her stands her likeness, a bride of porridge filled with fruits for the demon of the Herm,” says the beldame. “And who do you think is more pleasing to the demon?” says the beldame, “the bride or her likeness? That is a question answered by the demon,” says the beldame, “After the dusk has clotted but before the dusk has powdered, the demon decides which is pleasing. The bridegroom pours fresh oil upon the stones of the Herm to honor the choice.”

### **The Valley of Josef**

There is a story told in the valley of Josef. A man arrives in byrnie and helm. He holds a long-bearded axe. I am in search of a demon, says the man, the demon of kirk. He has no flesh on his bones so he wears a swaddle of fleece. His spine is bent so he walks on four feet. I have followed this beast to your valley, says the man, and so here I will seek, climbing the hillside with my axe aloft, though you like it not. We like it not, say the young men of the valley of Josef, and the man climbs the hillside with his black-hafted axe held to the sky, and the young men climb after. The man sees a beast grazing in the scree, grazing in the sliding, steeply pitched scree. It is our sheep, say the young men, but the man will not believe them. Such grazing is a feat too mighty for sheep, says the man, and he runs with the long-bearded axe, leaping from stone to stone up the slope, swinging the axe as he goes, preparing to strike the head from the sheep, but the stones slide from beneath his feet, and the man tumbles down the slope. His helm is loosed from his head and the young men see his pale curls darken with gore as he rolls to the base of the slope. When they reach him, his face is not the face of a man. The young men unbuckle his byrnie to hear if the heart beats yet in his chest. Beneath the byrnie, they find neither shirt nor skin. They find a cavity packed with damp fleece, and shank bones lodged therein, stinking. The young men buckle the byrnie. They cover the body with stones, small stones and sand. So formed the high sandy comb on the slope

of the valley of Josef. It is a formation of fleece and shank, mail and stone and sand.

### **Pancake Bell**

The cooper finds correspondence between her palms and the buttocks of the brewer. The ale-maker finds correspondence between her palms and the buttocks of the cooper. "It is not a subtle correspondence," says the cooper, inspecting her own palms as she bends to allow the ale-maker's inspection of her buttocks. Bending, the cooper sees more clearly the buttocks of the brewer. The cooper holds apart her palms to make a frame and peers through the frame at the buttocks of the brewer. The ale-maker inspects the buttocks of the cooper. The ale-maker has small deep palms and the cooper has small conical buttocks. "It is not a subtle correspondence," says the ale-maker. The cooper sits on the palms of the ale-maker. The brewer sits on the palms of the cooper. The ale-maker is sustaining the weight of both the brewer and the cooper. "Even though we three have found correspondences between palms and buttocks," says the ale-maker, "and so might suppose that others in the village will also find correspondences between palms and buttocks, we cannot suppose that the correspondences of palms and buttocks will correspond to each person's capacity to sustain the weight of the owner of the buttocks that correspond to her palms." "Moreover," says the cooper, "we cannot suppose that the correspondences between palms and buttocks will correspond to each person's capacity to sustain the weight, not only of the owner of the buttocks that correspond to her palms, but also of the owner of the buttocks that correspond to the palms of the owner of the buttocks she sustains." The cooper is sweating beneath the weight of the brewer. The ale-maker is sweating beneath the weight of the brewer and the cooper. The brewer holds her palms up to the sky.

### **Bjartur's Dream**

Before the end, he will come to great sorrow, and when at last, he finds himself dying, quite without strength of body, it is remarkable



that he cry out, surprised, for this is the way it is foretold and must happen, and many other bright eyes will dim and gold hairs go to dust without graying. Now it is time to begin. He is young but imposing. His father is king of broad lands with warships that scull well on the waters. The boy must leave these lands, though leaving speed his death, to earn red gold and praises. He takes wise counsel from the witch. Ride south, says the witch, when the butter melts, there a serpent breathes fire. Pierce his heart with this spear and eat his tongue of charred honey. That is a feat for a deedless man. Later you will drink from a poisoned cup and run the length of the hall, but poison is as fast as the fastest man and runs with him just beneath the skin. Running you will fall with the foam in your mouth. First ride, says the witch, while your blood is unmixed and your lips show no lather. The boy takes his spear, a good horse, and the thrall who has best cause to love him. He rides and when the butter melts and the fire makes the death-lights shine on his helm, he fights the serpent. He pierces the serpent, but how can he find the heart of the serpent? In a man the heart lies at known distance between the head and the foot. The boy knows nothing of a serpent's heart. It lies behind scales, in deep coils upon coils. His white helm shines with a terrible light. One scale in the serpent's breast winks like an eye. The boy pierces the serpent's heart through this eye and eats of the tongue. Soon he can speak the language of crows. When he sleeps in the forest, the she-wolf brings a cloak in her jaws. The thrall she devours. There is nothing for the boy to bury. The cloak is stitched with red flames. Of the serpent's treasures, he has taken rings and the reforged sword. He kills countless kings beneath their banners. No man has done such deeds or married such a woman. He would not tip chair and table to run past white faces, he would not raise that cry that the walls send back, but what can he turn to fight? There is nothing. There is green foam like the leeks. It is a hard thing to hear your name on men's tongues grow faint and fainter. But the sorrow is not smaller when the holdings taken are but sheepfold, croft, and homefield. Fire's warmth is not warming. I have slept in the forest so long my beard tangles with mosses. As the breath goes, it travels through mosses and mimics the speech of no creature.

## The Kirtle

“Do not marry,” says the beldame. “At the feast, the horn of mead is passed around the table, and honeyed breads, and the meat is portioned hugely. The men each eat their portion, and the women too, and between the portions no difference is permitted. The bride and bridegroom must eat their equal portions. They must each drain the horn of mead as dry, and soon the bride dozes,” says the beldame. “She dozes by the fire and her kinswomen carry her behind the arras to a cooler chamber. They stitch a woolen kirtle to her skin, a white woolen kirtle, thick enough so the blood does not spot the white wool of the kirtle. If the bride struggles,” says the beldame, “they choke her wind until she dozes. They stitch her lips around a ball of wool. They carry the bride into the meadow. They shatter her ankles with a heavy stone. They apply white pepper to her lips and tasting white pepper, the bride awakens,” says the beldame. “The bride awakens in the meadow. Her kinswomen have crept away and the bride sees only sheep. There are many sheep, white sheep. The bride crawls among the sheep. When the bridegroom is brought to the meadow, his kinsmen tie a linen strip around his eyes. They put the sharp knife into his hand. He stumbles among the sheep of the meadow. He catches hold of the sheep and cuts away their wool with his knife. He feels the skin of the sheep, the soft beating skin of the sheep, and he feels where the skin slopes and rises. He feels for the slopes and rises of the bride,” says the beldame. “She sees him,” says the beldame, “the bride sees the bridegroom. She sees him through the legs of the sheep, above the backs of the sheep, cutting away the wool of the sheep. The bridegroom must cut the bride’s kirtle,” says the beldame, “but the kirtle is sewn to the skin of the bride. Does the skin lie beneath the kirtle,” says the beldame, “or is the kirtle the skin? The bridegroom stumbles between sheep in the meadow. He holds the sheep. He feels the slopes and the rises. White wool drifts through the meadow. The bride dozes in the drifts of wool. When the bridegroom thrusts his hands into the drifts,” says the beldame, “he feels only the wool. No matter how deeply he cuts,” says the beldame, “the slopes and rises of the bride are not revealed to his touch.”

## The Village of the Boghole

“The nettles are soaked and will not sting,” says the beldame. “I soaked them in the boghole.” She eats cold nettles close beside me on the stump. “I would dress the nettles with oil,” says the beldame. “But I have no oil. I would press oil from the stump,” says the beldame, “but I have no stone. I have no strength,” says the beldame. “In the village of dock,” says the beldame, “the women press oils from roots. They press the roots between boulders. In the village of logan,” says the beldame, “the boulders move at a touch. The women of logan caress only the boulders,” says the beldame. “Those who would touch them they crush with the boulders. To crush takes just a caress.” I eat cold nettles with the beldame. The nettles sting my lips. They sting my tongue. They sting my throat. “Drink the water from the boghole,” says the beldame. “The water is soothing.” I put my lips to the boghole. I drink. The water coats my lips. It coats my tongue. It coats my throat. It is soothing. “In the village of the boghole,” says the beldame. “I drank the water of the boghole. I filled my body with the water, the dark water of the boghole.” Great cries come from the beldame. “My skin is stinging,” says the beldame. “There is pitch in the water,” says the beldame. “My scalls leak the pitch.” I touch the black scalls of the beldame. “Your fingers will stick,” says the beldame. “They will stick to my skin. Keep still,” says the beldame, “you will tear the hairs from my skin.” I keep still. I stand in great darkness. The darkness is thick. The darkness is as thick as the water from the boghole. It coats my lips. It coats my tongue. It coats my throat. “Am I breathing?” I ask the beldame. “The stump is sinking,” says the beldame, “but we float on the water. We are filled with the water,” says the beldame, “so we float. Hold me beneath the water of the boghole,” says the beldame. She speaks in the voice of a sow, of a broken-toothed ewe. “Why can’t I sink,” says the beldame, “why can’t I leave?” Great cries come from the beldame. “Yes, you are dying,” says the beldame. “I will hold you,” says the beldame. “I will hold you as I sink.” I feel the cold that comes from the boghole. “It comes from my bones,” says the beldame. “It comes from my teeth. Look up,” says the beldame, “those stars are my teeth.” I look at the darkness, the star-shaped dark in the darkness. “Are we deep in the boghole?” I ask the beldame. “Yes,” says the beldame, “you are inside my bones. You

are inside my teeth. I am diseased in my skin,” says the beldame, “but you are deeper than skin.” “I am cold,” I say to the beldame. “I ache in my bones.” “Yes,” says the beldame, “Come close. I will hold you. I will hold you beneath the disease in my skin.” “Do not hold me,” I say, but she holds me. I weep upon the beldame’s breasts. I can’t lift my head. I can’t see to leave. “There is nowhere to go,” says the beldame. “There is no other village. There is this darkness,” says the beldame, “a darkness without silence or peace.”

### **The Bargeman**

Beyond the boghole, a fern brake. A forest. A mountain. A plain. When you reach the corner of the plain, says the beldame, take the plain in your mouth. Take the corner of the plain in your mouth. The light will empty your mouth. We walk together on the stump, along the rim of the stump. It is dark. I hold the dark in my mouth. I hold the bog in my mouth. There is no way to reach the plain, the corner of the plain. The corner of the plain is a bright tongue; it fits in the groove of a mouth. My mouth has filled. It has filled with the dark of the boghole. Dark water flows from my mouth. How can I reach the plain? Each pipe of grass has three edges that reflect light. They shine into the dark of a mouth. The mouth is not my mouth. Dark water flows. It flows across the plain. Sunken in the boghole, a fern brake. A forest. A mountain. A plain. Bright pipes of grass. Who will have me? says the beldame. In the village of lichen, I was mistaken for lichen. In the village of lilies, I disfigured the lilies. I was the furze in the lilies. I was burnt like the furze. In the village of swards, I butchered my sow. I cupped the blood of my sow. I soaked my scalls in the blood of my sow. My scalls are deeper than the skin. They are filled with my blood. There is no room in my blood for the blood of my sow. The hairs on my scalls have turned white. I have no hairs on my head, says the beldame, but I have these white hairs on my scalls. We walk together on the stump. We come to a man, a crooked one, who leans over the rim of the stump. He is leaning on a pole, a pole that he thrusts into the boghole. He is poling the stump through the bog. From his pouch, he removes a bannock of oats. With one arm he poles. With the other arm, he eats of the bannock. You need strength, says the beldame. Yes, says the bargeman. The

strength of the oat. That is why I eat these oats. I eat these oats so I can pole us strongly through the bog. His mouth is filled with oats. His arm shakes as he poles. I will take the pole, says the beldame. She takes the pole. She thrusts the pole into the boghole. It does not touch the bottom, says the beldame. No, says the bargeman. But we are moving through the bog. I know because I vomit oats.