

1,500 Words
by Ida Marie Hede

Survival Sketches



Bad dreams, Marianna Simnett,
fairy tales and feminism

translated by
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All images
Marianna Simnett, *The Bird Game*, 2020,
film stills. Courtesy: the artist



THE FAIRY TALES THAT I SO OFTEN READ ALOUD TO MY DAUGHTER, her tired eyelids fluttering, are full of legless mermaids. Of princesses in sickbeds, often sedated, poisoned or incapacitated, and of women locked in chambers and towers, mutilated, abused. Fairy tales full of bodies like my daughter's. But bodies without agency, which rarely have a voice.

One morning, my daughter wakes up and tells me about a fairy tale she's dreamed. It feels like something drawn from our collective mother-daughter unconscious. I rub the sleep out of my eyes and listen:

'I dreamed I was a princess, Mum, but then an evil curse meant I couldn't laugh. I couldn't even smile like a real, wonderful, sweet princess is supposed to be able to. It was worse than Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) – you know how they steal her voice? But who knows if I was ever that cute? In the dream, no one really knew me. I lived in a small kingdom and my parents decided to hold an audition. Come and make the princess laugh and win her hand in marriage plus hundreds of doughnuts in a gift box! The audition was like a funny mix of *Married at First Sight* (2014–ongoing) and *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–ongoing). And – oh, yes – they came from near and far: princes, beggars and consultants, car salesmen, stand-up comics and teenage boys on scooters. They did all they could: juggled, swallowed fire, told dad jokes and showed off their shiny, tattooed heads, but my mouth wouldn't move. And then, out of the corner of an eye, I saw her: an old woman with long hair, slimy like seaweed. She lifted her skirt dramatically. The smell of vegetable soup and ginger rose to my nostrils. The woman's long, pink, flapping, glistening labia curled around the mild spring breeze and her eyes flashed. I broke into a long, deep, dark laugh.'

She smiles wildly at the end of the story. The dream's laugh surprises me. Maybe my daughter has noticed that threads of real lives run through the formulaic plots of every fairy tale. That the familiar narrative contains its own revolt? A message has been handed down to her: once the princess gets her voice back, the sound can't be locked up inside anymore. It's not the prince who gives it back. The dark laughter from my daughter's dream is a little survival sketch.

She goes to the living room to play; her teddy bears bicker loudly. I decide to listen to Dion McGregor, an American songwriter from New York, known for having co-written Barbra Streisand's hit 'Where Is the Wonder' (1965), but also for his dream-talking. In the 1960s, his friend Michael Barr placed a recorder by his sofa-bed and preserved his somniloquies for the future, hours and hours of strange scenarios: a mustard contest, social spaces with bizarre rules, a lazy guest. McGregor's fantastic, absurd, violent sleep-talking is its own genre.

A scientist claims that the images which play behind our closed eyelids are out of sync with the strict narrative logic of our dreams. The words can be so stupid; the images are like silk. McGregor says this:

'Well, let's see: I have a dodo and a rock and a phoenix ... oh dear! A pterodactyl, yes, the unicorn, the griffin, dear, oh yes, well a mermaid doesn't count, she's out in the pool! No ... well, if she ever gets out, I'm gonna mate her with the centaur! Yes! What do you think? Certainly! Well, I don't know. What do you think? Well, if you don't mate them, you know, they'll die off!'

McGregor's dream body is the one speaking. His conscious persona is free from blame.

Is there anything I can learn from him? Does he reveal the pervy, shadowy sides of myself, my longings? Or am I merely fascinated that he's so little on guard in his sleep?

Am I as free to speak when I'm awake as I am in my dreams?

'What are you listening to?' my daughter asks.

'To a very popular man from the old days, who could say anything because he was dreaming,' I respond. 'Do you think I watch you when you sleep?'

'I don't know,' she says. 'But you're always here, aren't you? I think it's silly that someone would want to mate with a centaur,' she continues. 'But especially with a mermaid. Mermaids have been through enough. Ariel risked her voice, her tail, for all that romance junk.'

I listen to my daughter, whose feminism is always underpinned by Disney classics without it ever compromising her. She takes the best and throws away the rest.

Later that day, we go to a museum. We see an exhibition titled 'Seizure', by the British, Berlin-based artist Marianna Simnett, at Copenhagen Contemporary. We spend a long time looking at two works in particular. My daughter sits restlessly on the gallery bench with her legs dangling.

In the film *The Needle and the Larynx* (2016), a blonde, pale – almost too pale, too beautiful – princess-like Simnett has Botox injected into the cricothyroid muscle in her neck by an ENT surgeon. The operation deepens her voice. We see her pale neck. The needle penetrates her larynx in slow motion. The muscle is paralyzed.

My daughter is captivated by Simnett's otherworldly appearance but afraid of needles. 'Don't run away,' I say, and hold her sweaty hand. 'The world isn't safe until you have a language for your fear and suffering capable of reaching other people; you need to have the kind of courage that is rooted in the bowels of the earth,' I say. 'Just try to listen, the chorus is singing so beautifully.' A hallucinatory, airy chorus of bright voices performs the soundtrack to *The Needle and the Larynx*. In this fable, a girl wishes for her voice to be deeper to better resemble the groans that keep her up at night. If her wish doesn't come true, she'll send a plague of mosquitoes after the surgeon. It's the music of an idyll, but the melody is asymmetric: 'Better to be numb,' the voices chant. 'Better to be numb than to think of what's to come.'

'What's she doing?' my daughter asks with her innate trust of other people's longings. I say: 'The girl is trying to let her voice change, to contradict her outer shell. She'll get her own voice back later. She's already tried red meat, whiskey and shrill bird cries; nothing worked. She wants to fuck with the systems that decide who's allowed to speak in high- or low-pitched voices, which bodies have access to needles and liquids. Maybe she wants to try out a whirling voice, maybe the voice of the heteropatriarchy? Maybe that's the only way she can keep her sanity or survive? She wants to equalize things, so that her body makes as much sound from the inside as the world's violence does around her.'

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a language for your fear and suffering capable
of reaching other people.



'They didn't tell me I was going to be so weakened by it,' says Simnett. We hear her voice break.

'MUM, WHAT'S HAPPENING?' my daughter cries. I continue: 'Now the girl in the movie is going limp, maybe because she suspects society won't take care of her in this state, but once her body has changed, who knows what will happen?' Simnett records herself 48 hours after the injection. Her words have a whispering, cryptic tone to them. I give her voice a body: a hairless Samson, lying on the ground in idle submission, weakly resigning from the fight.

'If she were a prince, I think it would be easier for her to tell the doctor that the needle hurts and that she's about to pass out,' my daughter says, 'and then everyone would come running in with plasters.'

Her commentary gives me goosebumps. The world doesn't listen to every weakened body. I begin quoting Virginia Woolf who, in *On Being Ill* (1930), writes about finding language for suffering and sickness: 'To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth.'

Is the violence of reality more ubiquitous than ever? Is my daughter's laughter my hope?



My daughter has run ahead of me into a dark room with strobe lights flickering across two large screens (*Faint with Light*, 2016). We hear Simnett hyperventilating; the light moves in time with her breathing until she faints, moaning. The light momentarily disappears. A moment later, she's resurrected, gasping for air.

Simnett dives into the boundary of consciousness and unconsciousness, death and life. Her bodies aren't the sick bodies of the everyday. These are not bodies living a muted life in chronic pain. Rather, they're elfish bodies in flamboyant revolt; they're limit-seeking Chris Burden bodies, which love states of shock, pain and transformation. Simnett's invisibility amplifies the effect. No bloody martyred figure is left behind.

My daughter falls dramatically onto the bench. 'Do you remember the part when Snow White wakes up and coughs and little bits of apple come out, Mum?' 'Yes,' I answer. 'Imagine if the necrophiliac prince couldn't see, but only heard her coughing, grunting and gasping?' I tell her about three women who voiced Disney's Snow White: Adriana Caselotti – an American singer who was paid US\$970 (around US\$19,000 today) for the job in 1935 and wasn't credited. Afterwards, she struggled to find work. No one wanted to spoil Snow White's purity. Lucie Dolène, who played the voice in the 1962 French version of the film and later won the rights to her own voice back from Disney, who used it without her permission. And my own voice, when I mute the movie and improvise to the movements of the characters' mouths.

'What happened when she was gone?' my daughter asks. I want to hear Simnett's account from the scene of the crime, too.

'Better to be numb, better to be numb than to think of what's to come.' To sleep like a little hedgehog, quills relaxed. Someone takes possession of your body. Sleeping is like being frozen. Are you sleeping or are you frozen? I ask myself: what kind of word shines through the surface of sleep? What am I supposed to do with the violent night stories that crop up in my daughter? Is the violence of reality more ubiquitous than ever? Is her laughter my hope? Later that day, she wakes me. 'Mum,' she says, 'you were talking, grunting.' She pokes a finger into my red cheek. 'I listen to you when you sleep.' **END**

Ida Marie Hede is the author of numerous plays and eight books, most recently *Suget eller Vasker du vores fuckfingre med dine tårer* (*The Suck: Or, Do You Wash Our Fuckfingers with Your Tears?*, Forlaget Basilisk, 2020), which was nominated for Politiken's Literature Prize and the Montana Prize. The English translation of *Adorable* (trans. Sherilyn Nicolette Hellberg) was published by Lolli Editions in May. She lives in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Sherilyn Nicolette Hellberg has published translations of works by Johanne Bille, Tove Ditlevsen, Jonas Eika and Olga Ravn. In 2018, she received an American-Scandinavian Foundation Award for her translation of Caspar Eric's *Nike* (2015). She lives in Copenhagen, Denmark.