

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE BONYLEG: ANNOTATED

Sarah Minor



THE PERSISTENCE OF THE BONYLEG: ANNOTATED

SARAH MINOR

a winner of the 2015 Essay Press
Digital Chapbook Contest
selected by Joseph Harrington



#65

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INTRODUCTION

– JOSEPH HARRINGTON

Prepare to enter the woods.

Naturally, there is an old woman waiting for you.

In the world Sarah Minor relates and creates, a family flees into the taiga, and a stump narrates what happens after that. Meanwhile, on the recto side of the forest, “Narrator” confesses that “Whenever I feel alone, I call upon other voices to help,” so she conjures up a passel of scientists, an encyclopedia, Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić, the voice of Fairytale itself, a real-life woman hermit, and even Baba Yaga (cross yourself with two fingers here).

The collision of history and myth creates a liminal space between inside and outside, permitted and forbidden, wildness and tameness, content and form, body-text and margin. A mother who eats her children and a mother who won’t eat so her children can. If Freud had been a fairytale, he would have asked “Why is woman scary?”

Well?... You first.

**THE
PERSISTENCE
OF THE
BONYLEG:**
annotated



The Lykovs are a family of six Old Believers who followed a river into the Siberian Abakan wilderness in 1936, fleeing from religious persecution under the Russian government. They remained there, in complete isolation, for 42 years, until they were discovered by a group of geologists exploring the area in 1978. The last surviving Lykov, Agafia Lykova, is 70 years old and continues to live in the Abakan today.

Narrator: Maybe I have been too much alone in the woods. Seen men walk between trees and not again. We had electric heat and automobiles in the taiga of my childhood. We had passports and could drive them back home. Maybe the voices of birches there were an echo of my own. Here I am a gatherer, stuck fast; I cannot see Russia from my house, or anything that hides inside of it. But I do have a few things to say.

in spring: the clouds were soot-finger banded and when the sun grew a ring the snow crust began to sweat. Those first shadows of geese trailed buds in their wake. Half-trees and sheaves of ice sailed the loose Abakan like vessels manned by the dead. If they buried seeds in May the frost stamped them all with a graven mark. The traps they made too early caught females heavy with young and then the family grew hungry by autumn. When the children were still small their mother stripped a piece of the wood the way she'd undress a snowshoe rabbit and their father felled the old trees to make a garden like the very first. Together they planted potatoes and thickened in the middle. They made a second plot with onions and peas, hemp, rye, and carrots, *the Lord's sweetest root*, but every amber seed went missing with ash mice in the autumn before the hungry year. They would have told you they cherished their seeds as dearly as iron and prayer books. They had carried the first of these into the taiga on the Ark when the youngest was just a flash in her Papa's heavy eye, and they would never return for more. They came into the taiga hide from our oppressors, from Patriarch Nikon *I spit on his name*, to hide and pray to God, and there is where they will stay. Their Papa always told them that the taiga was where they would die.

1. **Scientists:** "At first we had a hard time understanding the daughters' speech. Their way of speaking was unique—a muffled, nasal chanting. When the sisters talked to each other, it sounded like a slow, blurred cooing."
2. **Narrator:** This I is shifting, okay? Over there, I was a schismatic. I's own birth was an act of rebellion.
3. **Fairytale:** The taiga is a swath of coniferous forest—the world's largest Terrestrial Biome. Eleven percent of the northern hemisphere. You go in by helicopter. You take boats or skis if you are half-witted, as most are, and for six months the snow is waist high and doesn't bother the wolves. The taiga's depths are eddied by the heli-guttering of survey parties. The taiga is a dark house on chicken legs where no footprints mark the snow. An amber stripe of iron ore the hero risks his tongue to gouge. Where spruce spines string Europe to China and Mongolia to the arctic arc to make the sign of the true cross. Or Northeastern European Floristic Province of the Circumboreal Region of the Holarctic Kingdom. Or, there are some woods can eat the paths behind you. The eyes of trees do not blink and as the alder flicks its faceted gaze you turn and turn clockwise and are lost as you always would have been. Oh, Godmother.
4. **Narrator:** I do love to go outside. Have you been sent there?
5. **Fairytale:** When you are sent to the two-legged hut of the Baba Yaga for a needle and some thread, you will need a ribbon and a tinderbox, a bread rusk and a slice of ham.
6. **Narrator:** This year I am paid to work as a dissector of fairytales.
7. **Narrator:** I am a researcher trained at a search between folds. I pay my rent by listing motifs. And so I read fairytales in bed, a lot. So I am literate in offal. In auguring. I ply and look for patterns that can explain.
8. **Fairytale:** Birds, wolves, isolation, white, air, crystal, flowers, pearls.
9. **Narrator:** If these seem worn and trite to you it is because you never knew them otherwise.

what the garden stump said: here is the version only I can tell. Here is my one solace in this vast solitude, after a faith I learned from the children who sat beside me and made me their plaything, and the words they carried off with them. Who would expect such a tale from a thing solid as a garden stump? Some of it I must have made all up when there was little to do but hear and hold the weight of careful drifts, straight spines with baskets and the sometimes of a paw. Some of it is too much for even the good patience of a stump—but without it all, I am nothing but that.

10. **Fairytale:** Baba Yaga (Bonyleg): *Baba* is a babble word. Ukrainian a *babushka*, Polish *babcia*, Russian *babusia*. An old woman, a grandmother; timid, characterless boy; a midwife, a völv, a fortuneteller; in Slavic, a mushroom, a cake, a pear, a mountain, a funeral feast. *laga* (Yaga) is from *jeza* and *jezinka* in Old Czech. Dryad, disease, fury, pain. Is a snake, is slowly, is torture, is doubting, is worries, a shudder, a witch.
11. **Narrator:** I have this idea about old women and media, how one could not be sustained without the other. How a woman looking at a woman on screen is only an ancient brittle archetype.
12. **Narrator:** Looking at animals works this way too.
13. **Narrator:** And this idea about literature and the people who write it down. An idea about the fear of little old ladies. Mostly, I got that while reading the translated writing of Dubravka Ugrešić.
14. **Ugrešić:** “Baba Yaga lives on the edge of a forest, in a cramped little hut that stands on hen’s legs and turns around on the spot. She has one skeleton-leg (“Baba Yaga, Bony leg!”), dangling breasts that she dumps on the stove or hangs over a pole, and she flies around in a mortar, rowing herself through the air with a pestle, wiping away her traces with a broom.”
15. **Narrator:** Getting lost is not the worst of available experiences.
16. **Narrator:** How else do you plan to find anything out?
17. **Ugrešić (on Ugrešić):** “I would wish you to understand the following text as one path through the forest of meanings, in other words a path through a fairytale turned inside out. I shall try to make the path as easy as possible. All I ask is that you should be a little patient.”
18. **Narrator:** To the I over there, language is the breaking point, written words an expression of God.
19. **Narrator:** Tradition meaning the masses.
20. **Narrator:** The I will not submit.
21. **Narrator:** The I was once an old woman too, but as usual the I has become a severed stump.

what the garden stump said: in the Spring of our Lord 7475 from Adam the children were still no higher than the plane of my stump, and they slept like nested leaves on the floor beside a fire in the little hut their father had built for them. They searched the mountain aven and the fireweed and spooked thrushes from their nesting in the chimney mouth. All knobbled feet kicking, their tongues were bilberry bruised and blurring at hymnals. In May a pack of mother wolves came to sound dry throats and pry noses through the door hinge and it was then that they all learned to pray. *We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;*

22. **Ugrešić:** "Myths and legends and oral traditions are like viruses. Similar 'stories' exist everywhere—in Slavic forests, on African deserts, the foothills of the Himalayas, in Eskimo igloos—and they seep through to our own time and our own mass culture, to TV soaps, sci-fi series, Internet forums and videogames."
23. **Narrator:** I do not know what to say about the outside, except that it is a made thing for insiders to feel safe about.
24. **Ugrešić:** "Synonyms have a protective function, and the protection they offer is mostly used to protect children. People often refer to a witch as *she over there*, for fear of uttering her name."
25. **Narrator:** I have an idea that an artist should especially try the things she is expressly told not to.
26. **Ugrešić:** "Baba Yaga is a unique oral-textual 'patchwork' of folklore and mythico-ritual traditions and her status, function, and authority change from tale to tale, from one zone of folklore to another, from male storytellers to female. Baba Yaga is a text that is read, studied, told, adapted, interpreted, and reinterpreted differently at different times."
27. **Fairytale:** Time, a chest, a hatchet, a storm, a thimble, a house.
28. **Narrator:** Forgive me, I spend a lot of time working in bed.
29. **Narrator:** And I have undergone a lot of direct address.
30. **Narrator:** I am used to conversing across quilts, where listeners are half conscious, more likely to interpret as they will.
31. **Narrator:** And I drink heavily and often with old women.
32. **Narrator:** They seem this way, too.
33. **Ugrešić:** "Some authors even maintain that the name Baba Yaga is unknown in Slavic mythology, and that she belongs exclusively to the world of fairytales."

what the garden stump said: in the Spring of our Lord 7480 from Adam, the first snows fell heavy at the height of June. They froze old roots, the marrow of birds and hares in their dens, but my garden suffered the worst of all. Frost gnawed at the vegetable stores and come next spring the children ate the straw, they ate Savin's leather. They ate the rowanberry leaf and their ski linings. The thin one's legs took on the shape of her bones and never again found a color far beyond snow. The children ate bark and birch buds, they sucked the root loam and prayed. *And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages;* That year a hunger buried their mother beneath the eight-points cross that now shades the path by the river where skimmers peck at little prints. Now this taiga is a mother to all of us. She is no God but we must beg her kindness. The next year was good, or it should take all the children to heaven. The taiga comes back like the red doe with the cloven womb. This is not true of the Lykovs; we have one life before God.

34. **Narrator:** I have this idea about hair; how it's not hair until it moves out of bounds.
35. **Narrator:** Idea: The head is not a place that can be hairy. Elsewhere though, is.
36. **Narrator:** Diapers to diapers—cradle to grave they say. Baldness of the head is not admired, except in infants, and even then.
37. **Ugrešić (on Ugrešić):** "Here, then, is how things stand.... There are no better and worse literary interpretations, there are only good and bad books. Secondly: myths are memes, 'units of cultural transmission.... Myths take themselves to pieces, add bits on, mutate, get transformed, adapt and readapt. Myths travel; in travelling, they retell and 'translate' themselves."
38. **Narrator:** Beds are flying things. Places of birth landings and death takings off.
39. **Ugrešić:** "The elusive Baba Yaga sometimes appears as a helper, a donor, sometimes as an avenger, a villain, sometimes as a sentry, sometimes as an intermediary between worlds. Most interpreters locate Baba Yaga in the ample mythological family of old and ugly women with specific kinds of power, in a taxonomy that is common to mythologies the world over."
40. **Narrator:** I would like to be buffeted at all times, a referent on each side. I want to live on the coast of a solid textual landform. I seek compression so that ideas get their own container and stay.
41. **Narrator:** Out of bed, I like to work on the floor of libraries, between the shelves of books containing the subjects of my interest. My pair of legs is the exact length of the floor space dividing most stacks. I pretend osmosis in these instances, the physical weight on my soles and spine, this condensing of one body on into the next. And I detest movable, crushable, electronic shelving. Someday it will lock us all down.

what the garden stump said: in the Spring of our Lord 7483 from Adam, the children's Papa fell from a high pine and onto his back and he could not speak for nearly tenhands breaths. When he stood his eyes were far away and they laid him on the stove and we all prayed while I stood watch outside. *Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten, not made; being of one essence with the Father; by Whom all things were made;*

42. **Scientists:** "They were cut off from all human contact, they were unaware of World War II."

43. **Encyclopedia of Russian History,** The Great Schism of 1653:

BEARD TAX: The beard tax is the best known of a series of measures to regulate the appearance of Russian subjects. Any Russian who wanted to wear a beard was ordered to pay a special tax and obtain a token from government officials. The Old Believer sects were disproportionately affected by the tax.

OLD BELIEVERS: (Old Ritualists or raskolniki—schismatics) includes a groups who separated from the Russian Orthodox Church in protest of reforms introduced in 1653 by Russia's Patriarch Nikon in his attempt to unify the Russian and Greek Orthodox traditions.

The Old Believers rejected the idea of content prevailing over form. For them, in the case of ritual, form and content were inseparable, tied intrinsically through complex psychological, phenomenal, and historic relationships. The symbolic centerpiece of the Old Believer resistance was the two-fingered sign of the cross. The most radical of them maintained that the reforms in ritual had put the Church in the hands of the Antichrist.

OLD BELIEVER COMMITTEE: In 1820, Emperor Alexander I convened a secret committee to advise his policies regarding the Old Believers. Originally given the task of finding an appropriate form of toleration within the Russian legal system, conservative committee members pushed the committee's views to more stringent enforcement of punitive laws.

Rather than conform to these, the Old Believers endured severe persecution, torture, arrest, and death. The authorities let them rot in deep pits, pulled out their tongues, forbade them from building churches or ringing bells. They burnt them on stakes or smoked them "like bacon." To escape persecution, many turned to asceticism, rejected papers, money, and fled into the sanctuary of bordering regions and remote wilderness.

43. **Narrator:** Idea: All that wildness can do is get tamed, otherwise it can only be.

what the garden stump said: it was the Spring of our Lord 7486 from Adam that a Great Panic came upon the children and Savin feared he had lost track of their days. It was the thin one, Agafia, who caught back the string of time and has gripped it since. Now the children greet each sun with a naming of what day we are living, and of the sacred holiday, and the count of their years lived. Their Papa's has now come to sixteenhands. Can a person go on, if he does not ail, until his beard drags behind upon the ground between his feet? The thinnest tells me some secrets. She keeps a ledger in her mind the way she does her lessons and marks strips of my bark with figures to save them away. Someday she will leave me barren and I won't mind. When she comes to lay her head down and tell me of her dreams, she occasions: "I am chronicler and priest, I am a bride of Christ alone." Morning, noon, night—these are easy to discern in the mid-seasons when the sun casts its shadow on my back in the evening. The children can all tell the month by the moon—the white blades that rise near its end tell them when to take meat and when it is forbidden by God, and when to prepare rye porridge for Savin on sacred holiday.

44. **Narrator:** I is waiting for the coming, first of death, and then the lord.
45. **Fairytale:** Houses, speaking animals, clothing, a grandmother, a mirror, a confinement.
46. **Narrator:** Idea: A thesis is a thing designed for snacking. A shallow aphorism, a thing trying best to contain.
47. **Narrator:** Idea: a fairytale is considered a women's and children's story, and these people are considered outsiders, even though most of us are them.
48. **Narrator:** What is the rightness of Contemporary Literature? How is it still useful? Who has it in hand and isn't it boring?
49. **Ugrešić:** "They approached the hearth where they found two old grannies with two balls of wool: one was winding the wool, the other unwound it. The one who was winding was day, and the other was night."
50. **Narrator:** Regarding literature, I am a haruspex and not a scholar.
51. **Narrator:** But I have been out of doors and I like it there. Many people seem to claim that they prefer to be outside, but sigh in relief when they come back in. I must admit I am this way too.
52. **Fairytale:** Obey the chores Baba bids you and do not dawdle, though old Bonyleg heats a bath to wash you for her breakfast. Say, "I am weaving, Auntie, I am!" to delay when she calls you by name.
53. **Narrator:** I have an idea that does not look right in a sentence. I have a thing I am trying to say but it contains stray hairs.
54. **Narrator:** Something about the subject of wildness.
55. **Narrator:** And one about the old womanimal too.
56. **Ugrešić:** "Vladimir Propp explains certain archaic forms of the Russian tale, where a billy-goat, bear or magpie lies in the hut instead of Baba Yaga. The frontier between animal and human is a person with an animal leg. In the case of Baba Yaga, who according to Prop guards the entrance to the world of the dead, this leg is replaced with the skeleton leg."

what the garden stump said: the Spring of our Lord 7488 from Adam. Savin is he who butts me with his toe, who makes leather and prays with two fingers. *Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from the Heavens, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man;* He who sleeps upright to please God but whose belly aches when work is to be done in the garden. “You are praying wrong!” he shouts in the morning if the other children do not bow as low as yesterday. To Savin, Dmitry will only say “All right for you.” The thin one will whisper, “God is everyone’s judge.”

- 57. **Narrator:** Q: Is the female nude boring yet?
- 58. **Narrator:** Q: Is the swan?
- 59. **Narrator:** Q: The wolf?
- 60. **Narrator:** Idea: No, not as long as they are still considered untamed.
- 61. **Ugrešić:** “Baba is also connected with the popular concept of time. Baba Marta personifies the third month of the year, especially in Bulgaria, but also in Serbian and Macedonian folklore.”
- 62. **Fairytale:** Human doubles, metal, mothers, the grotesque, a feast, a glass.
- 63. **Narrator:** Who is the media and where do I hurt them?
- 64. **Scientists:** “You could tell these people valued the ability to read highly. It may have been the object of their greatest pride. The girl Agafia wrote in Old Church Cyrillic with a shaky hand, but well. Gradually, we learned that the family had gone off into the taiga in the 1920s and were convinced that this was how true Christians ought to live. ”
- 65. **Fairytale:** Give the cat a bit of ham—he is black and on the stove in the house upon legs and will sit for you at the loom when Baba calls. Trade some breadcrumbs to the mice for Yaga’s towel and her comb as she kneads the dough in the corner with her two great dugs.

in summer: light swells the sky and strings hymns up through the high pines. Now is the time for building. Now is the season of blood sipping flies. Now they gather pine nuts. They follow the ways of gatherers. Sometimes Dmitry calls them by the names of squirrels, for they have fur about their ears, they are ashen all over, they scrounge now and then at the ground. They grind cones and pour their dust into the wind to sift nut from chaff. They wade knee deep in moss that will later be snow. They pluck chapeaued mushrooms and the huckleberries from their blinks between leaves to save them for when winter has wearied them with potato skin. The white trees are sacred, they grey in the rain. Their skins are pale and streaked as a pair of knees above naked heels. They bleed the bark of juice and drink. They stave the old garden from gatherers who will drag everything to burrows if left unwatched. I could swear to you that the grains stretch high before their faces. What is lower than their roots? How far down is hellfire? Even in summer, Papa does not let them sit with hands folded. They read aloud from their holy books of stories that once happened and are happening all the time. They tell one another the moments of their lives again. The best of days are when everyone comes together and tells openly of their dreams. These are like sacred holidays in a single hour, when everyone can sit across from a face and converse. In the summer they try to hold the sun inside their mouths, but think often on the winter to come, and there is never any time.

66. **Narrator:** I am needing an education.
67. **Narrator:** I am afraid that Ugrešić would like to swing a sword at me.
68. **Ugrešić:** "What's beyond dispute is that Baba Yaga sprouted in mythological soil, but also that, as a character, she took shape in Russian folktales between the 18th and 20th centuries, when hundreds of versions of these tales were written down. Baba Yaga grew out of complex and long-lasting interaction between folklore and ritual traditions, the tellers of folktales, folklorists and commentators; out of the blending of Indo-European and pre-Indo-European mythologies."
69. **Narrator:** You, too?
70. **Narrator:** Is a woman extra famous if she is famous and a woman?
71. **Fairytale:** A storm, stars, blunted motifs, isolation as unburdening.
72. **Narrator:** Idea: It would not be so bad to be a bride of Christ these days.
73. **Ugrešić:** "In a time of drought, Polish peasants believe that an old witch is squatting in an oak tree (meaning, in a nest), keeping eggs warm and that the drought will go on until the chicks hatch. In Bulgarian folklore, Baba is a picturesque synonym for day and also for night."
74. **Narrator:** Idea: Solitude is the central experience of becoming an adult.
75. **Narrator:** Friends tell me it doesn't have to be that way, but only the ones who are children currently because they never got to be one before.
76. **Narrator:** Once I heard someone say that young people are afraid of solitude because they do not know yet that there are worse things to feel.
77. **Narrator:** Whenever I feel alone, I call upon other voices to help.
78. **Ugrešić:** "The lack of explicit references to Baba Yaga in your author's text stems in part from the muddle around the figure of Baba Yaga herself...and partly from popular superstition. For the Slavs, as for many other peoples, the utterance of names is swathed in taboos."

what the garden stump said:

It was the Summer of our Lord 7487 from Adam that the thin one built herself a new shed for storage of her choosing beside me. The brothers build more deftly and their lifting is faster, but she asks and she asks and it is easier herself. She is bony and scarf-headed but she wields the axe as well as the bucket and says, "I am my own man" when asked to come inside. Who else can keep our days, my God? Dmitry did help chapeau the roof. He and she came directly from their mother into the taiga like stumps that grow there and remain in the earth. They are not marked by the world like the rest who speak of it quietly, on occasion. Now Dmitry knows more than even a stump of these parts. He can pull up his roots and wander. He knows all that runs on the mountain like his own fingers through coarse hair. He shows the others where the grouse harbor their young by the garden, where the audacious birds bury nuts in footprints by the stream. He knows where the stags keep themselves. He can hunt a musk deer for days across the mountain and he stands still as a trunk in the snow. He sleeps outside in the long night under the heat of his biggest kills and speaks to the dark crows from where they've clotted trees with nesting. They call to him of bad weather and wind the sky when there is a struggle in the hunting pit. Once, Dmitry caught a wolf in his trap and kept it alive before setting it go. He kills when he must, and this is often.

79. **Narrator:** Are you not afraid of old women and their *places*?
80. **Narrator:** They are so covered up you can only imagine them otherwise?
81. **Narrator:** And they are probably thinking about hell? Alone?
82. **Fairytale:** July 1978—heli-guttering in the depths. It is the Abakan's upper reaches and a clearing below looks too much like a garden not to be. It is 250 kilometers to the nearest human village, if one would call it that, and the pilot sends it in when he sees a hut beside. Four geologists get the call. They make the camp. Their eyes are glazed in amber ore—they agree to investigate six thousand feet up. Our heroes choose a clear day and trudge into the wood up the mountain. They pack gifts for their new neighbors and their pistols are loaded. They cross a log-laid stream, a shed with birch bark buckets, three staffs; they add their boot prints to the bare feet in the mud.
83. **Fairytale:** Domestic items, sublimation, reversals, scarcity, death.
84. **Narrator:** When I become Taiga, animal vessel, all white and sleeping, all old growth and a crust of cell exchange, with little but the pull to consume.
85. **Narrator:** How will I resist the urge to write about aging (suffering), as if I am the first to suffer (age)? How will I keep myself from serving as referent?
86. **Scientists:** "Imagine our surprise when one day the entire contingent showed up at our tents, in single file. All five were dressed in burlap. And barefoot. They moved soundlessly. Carrying staffs. Slung from shoulder straps were sacks of potatoes and pine nuts, which they had brought as presents."

what the garden stump said: The Summer of our Lord 7491 from Adam. Dmitry was fond of a bear who shared in his wandering solitude when she lived up the mountain and the children left pinecones outside their hut—she craved them too. She was small and the color of just burned leaves. She was storing up fat for winter. This was the year when the thin one's feet stopped obeying her for a season and a beating would not abandon her ears. This was the year when Dmitry found half of their friendly bear by the river and an enemy red with her blood. I am always the first to hear screams. The red bear tore apart the sheds and stalked the children until the people came from the world gave them a weapon and they put her to death. When we prayed, I cursed myself for cowering where I stood, for not lifting just a root to halt the red bear's charge. *And was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried; And arose again on the third day according to the Scriptures;* The children did not eat her cubs but left them for wide mouthed animals, for God commands them not to eat those who walk on the paw but only the hoof, and then the vultures came for days.

87. **Narrator:** Come in from the storm.
88. **Narrator:** When I read Dubravka Ugrešić's work it was at my grandmother's house.
89. **Narrator:** It was all white inside.
90. **Narrator:** And I took electronic notes.
91. **Narrator:** She was dying, but it took some time to cry.
92. **Ugrešić:** "A popular Russian woodcut from the early 18th century depicts Baba Yaga going into battle with a crocodile. Supposedly the crocodile is Peter the Great (the Old Believers called him: 'the crocodile'). Baba rides on a swine. Her belt is a tangle of a hatchet and a distaff, one 'male' object and the other 'female'.... Hence Baba Yaga, in the imagination of the anonymous woodcut-artist, possesses both symbols of power."
93. **Narrator:** There was white behind the notes.
94. **Narrator:** And there were cats.
95. **Narrator:** And large pairs of underwear.
96. **Narrator:** All were white.
97. **Narrator:** She would not like me saying that.
98. **Narrator:** My great-grandma had a lobotomy.
99. **Narrator:** That either.
100. **Narrator:** But now neither of them is alive.
101. **Scientists:** "Two Lykovs had never seen a human outside of the family and they knew nothing of fairytales or secular texts. We asked if they had seen goblins or witches in the wood and they shook their heads gravely."
102. **Narrator:** There was a lot of light coming in through glass.
103. **Narrator:** But it was still very indoors.
104. **Narrator:** The carpet was white too.
105. **Narrator:** And had been so for twenty-five years.
106. **Narrator:** That's just how old I am right now.
107. **Narrator:** My information is limited.

what the garden stump said: The Summer of our Lord 7492 from Adam. Natalia the older does not partake of meat unless she must, though this is often. Natalia, godmother to the rest, is known for long words and strange laughter. It is said that she and the thin one are like river and sky, that their faces are alike and their speech is strange and hymnal. After their mother was taken, the children wore themselves out. Godmother learned how to weave and sewed them all *lopatinki* to wear, but she suffered that she was not sufficient. The children obeyed her badly, and everything went to ruin.

108. **Narrator:** So I first read about Agafia in a language she can't speak, through a medium she may not believe in. But we were both beside rivers, without any matriarchs left, or men.
109. **Narrator:** Later the Internet confirmed this itself.
110. **Narrator:** As did *Vice*, a semi-reputable media source.
111. **Narrator:** All were male.
112. **Narrator:** All were white.
113. **Ugrešić:** "In many cultures a hut like Baba Yaga's is part of initiation rites for young males entering the adult world."
114. **Narrator:** *Vice* writes of visiting Agafia in the Abakan, "When we arrived, Agafia was waiting for us outside her cabin like a sweet granny expecting a visit from her grandchildren."
115. **Fairytale:** Tie the ribbon to the birches so they do not scratch out your eyes. Set fire to the shed where Baba keeps the children caged for dinner. And when you run may it be fast and may the foxes miss your hem. May the stump skirt your ankles and may you not bang the gate as you go.
116. **Narrator:** And *Vice* titled their documentary series "Out There."
117. **Narrator:** They sent a man in blue jeans to hang out and shovel her roof.
118. **Narrator:** And Agafia was always smiling.
119. **Narrator:** And her answers were circular and poetic and unabashed.
120. **Narrator:** "Then came science," Agafia says into the camera, "The godless science. Horrible Science. Soul crushing science."
121. **Ugrešić:** "Baba Yaga's cannibalism, from a folkloristic point of view, is linked to a ritual with a frightful name: 'baking the child properly'. This ritual was performed on children suffering from rickets."
122. **Narrator:** Then Agafia pulled out a yellowed volume a handwidth thick and said, "This book is about four hundred years old."

what the garden stump said: When I dream now it is to find that she has grown a pinecone as big as the house. Dmitry has to use his axe to pry loose its nuts and I don't even mind the cuts. Each child has one nut to hold in both hands, and they bite from each as from the biggest carrot in the garden and all of their teeth remain.

123. **Fairytale:** Contrastive tension, jumps to action, stylistic heightening.
124. **Narrator:** And what if we have no children to talk to? And how do we justify it otherwise, if we do?
125. **Fairytale:** When Baba comes flying on her pestle wielding mortar high, press your ear to the frozen ground and when you hear Yaga near, toss your towel in the air and it becomes a wide river beside you.
126. **Narrator:** Maybe I will have a little child for a while. Then, when she gets too big, when she first starts hurting, I will eat her.
127. **Narrator:** She will only ever be the right kind of alone.
128. **Narrator:** The good pain of childhood makes adults with perspective.
129. **Narrator:** I will only suffer her intellectual pain.
130. **Ugrešić:** "In one story, after gobbling salt, Baba Yaga drinks seawater to slake her thirst, until she gives violent birth to snakes, worms and spiders."
131. **Ugrešić:** "The common folk suppose that a woman cannot become a witch until she eats her own child."
132. **Narrator:** Akolina Lykov did not only die of starvation, she refused food so that her children would eat.
133. **Narrator:** I have an idea.
134. **Narrator:** I want to converse in them.
135. **Ugrešić:** "It is believed that when a witch falls asleep, a butterfly or bird flies out of her mouth, 'and if she turns over, the butterfly or bird cannot return whence it came, so it will die, and so will the woman.'"
136. **Ugrešić:** "There is also a popular belief that moths are really witches, so it is best to throw them on the fire or scorch their wings."
137. **Ugrešić:** "There is a folk belief that witches ride in eggshells."
138. **Narrator:** Two ideas walk into the woods and are mistaken for witches.

in autumn: Storms from the north move in and pour white teeth into the river and their feet cannot any longer reach the bottom. Then the slush ice will come. Then their nets are full of graylings and lenok, writhing and silver in scattered sand. The rain is weeks now and fog tangles among the trees and cannot free itself. Now is when they hang the birch buckets bottom-up so they do not fill and burst themselves. Now the precious bears lie down in their dens and do not wake until spring. If only they could be so lucky—gatherers do not sleep through winter. They climb the trees and shake down their cones to grind milk that even the cats will drink. Now they pull and pull potatoes from the garden and some still too green are lost. Their Papa does not pull and such and at times Savin is the same. Now they slice them into moons and lay these in the sun to curl. Now even the berries crisp with morning ice and It is coming. The stovelit moths—what can they eat? They beat to get inside and die but even they are nothing between two teeth. In the autumn taiga distances grow close. The dying fold in their wings and God is inseparable from the sky.

139. **Scientists:** "Often, the conversation was broken by their impulse to pray that very second. Turning to face where the icons stood in the dark, the old man and his daughter loudly sang their prayers as they told off the ridges on the counter they used to keep track of their bows. The prayer stopped as abruptly as it began and the conversation took up where it left off."
140. **Narrator:** Idea: No one is unafraid of the female body.
141. **Ugrešić:** "On the stove, on the ninth brick, lies Baba Yaga with her bone leg, her nose touching the ceiling, her slobber seeping over the doorstep, her dugs dangling over the lug, sharpening her teeth."
142. **Narrator:** All women are witches.
143. **Narrator:** All witches have ideas.
144. **Narrator:** Can you hear them?
145. **Narrator:** Hush—we mustn't say that aloud.
146. **Ugrešić:** "Great dangling dugs are not reserved to Baba Yaga alone."
147. **Narrator:** Everyone Agafia ever knew died from curable illnesses
148. **Narrator:** Pediatrics clinic curable.
149. **Narrator:** Waldrug curable?
150. **Narrator:** Are the acetic religious truly more satisfied with the coming of death than I?
151. **Fairytale:** When Baba calls her horsemen to drink the river dry, toss your comb across your left shoulder and it is a coppice of birch behind you.
152. **Narrator:** Idea: In life, as in fairytales, an ugly daughter is of much more concern to a mother than an ugly son.
153. **Fairytale:** Metafictional awareness, chaos, incongruence, imperfections.
154. **Narrator:** Idea: An idea about female characters cannot not also be about real women.

what the garden stump said: When the people of the world came in the Autumn of our Lord 7490 it was not quietly. The children heard them long before they were seen and one laid his sack upon my plane, so I could not hear well. Their Papa was still praying that it was a herd of elk passing close until the children saw the people through the hinges and all were much afraid. Papa always knew that one day the world would find him out. He foretold that their oppressors would come and shear he and Savin of their beards and take their hymnals and force the children away from the garden and back to Patriarch Nikon *I spit on his name*, but Papa invited the people inside “since you have traveled this far,” and so they came. When they stood in the doorway they seemed full up with evil. Light streamed from their backs as if they lay together in the river and each of them wore the most indecent trousers I had seen. They troubled the grass at the brim of my trunk. The thin one’s eyes spread and curled back into the corner of the house like two mice and Natalia fell to her knees and lamented, crying, “this is for our sins, this is for our sins.” Then the people were gone the way they came and we all prayed the children would not go away with them. *And ascended into the Heavens, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father; And shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead; Whose Kingdom shall have no end;*

155. **Narrator:** Idea: First, a woman is scary for what the world will do to her (to be scared for).
156. **Ugrešić:** “Mythical beings give themselves away by the noises they make. Baba Yaga uses repetitious phrases and can be recognized by her remarkable wheezing breath. Many of those attributes—specifically ‘noisiness,’ hand clapping, repeating words (echolalia)—could be attributed to autism, or old age.”
157. **Narrator:** Idea: Second, a woman is scary because she cannot behave as is expected, and because she could act out of turn and tempt or upset the balance (scared because of).
158. **Ugrešić:** “Yet, more often, she appears as a helpmet and liberator.”
159. **Narrator:** Idea: Third, a woman is scary because she is no longer desirable or impregnable and is understood to serve no physical function (what can she *do* with her body?) and then she is invisible and so she is scary because we do not know what she plans for us, because the functionless, like her, begin to symbolize death (scared of).
160. **Ugrešić:** “Hunters in the forests of north-eastern Siberia build little cabins that they call labaz or chamja on top of high wooden stilts (like the hen’s legs under Baba Yaga’s hut!) as a hunters’ storehouse, to keep supplies safe. The back of the labaz is turned towards the woods.”
161. **Narrator:** *But what is the thing? The second thing? No, the first.* The first thing is everything and the second is hard to say. It does not like sentences. It writhes out and leaves a husk of dress clothing behind that smells nothing like an idea anymore.
162. **Narrator:** Tidy up the syntax.
163. **Narrator:** Tuck in the folds of skin.
164. **Narrator:** The labia and jowl are touching.
165. **Narrator:** Come, say just what you mean.

what the garden stump said:

In the Autumn of our Lord 7490 Dmitry and Savin came from the house across the river and the people offered the children things they are not allowed and Savin watched close by. The people moved like tripping deer in the sights of a mother wolf but with time the children found they were good, though they could not be called Christians. When the people came next they brought salt. I heard their Papa say that eating without it was his one true torture for 40 years, the same number I have known since he first made me into a searing stump. The children now know from the people that the world is still full of temptation and impiety. Christians must hide and fear. When Savin saw that one of the people was a woman, though she wore trousers, he shouted "Dmitry, a girl! It's a girl!" though Natalia the older and Agafia the thin one are also girls the same.

Last night I dreamed of a bear crucified in the way of our lord, like the thinnest described to me, between the eight black arms of the Mama's cross, but without blood. The summer moss was wet with green but frost had split the grave mound and upon it stood a roasting spit smoking a new leg of meat. When I looked across the river Savin was standing with eyes spread at the thin one, and then I was awake again.

166. **Narrator:** Okay, do you know the words?
167. **Narrator:** Sing together with me.
168. **Narrator:** All together now.
169. **Narrator:** Repeat.
170. **Narrator:** Once upon a time...
171. **Narrator:** I've already told you what's coming...
172. **Narrator:** Once, a long time ago...
173. **Narrator:** There was, there was not...
174. **Narrator:** Behind seven lands and seas there lived...
175. **Narrator:** In the days of...
176. **Narrator:** In some kingdom, in some land...
177. **Narrator:** In a time that never was and is always....
178. **Narrator:** This is an old story...
179. **Narrator:** Time was...
180. **Ugrešić:** "Let us say it once again: Baba Yaga is a witch, but she does not belong to the coven; she can be good and evil; she is a mother, but she is her daughter's killer; she is a woman, but she has no man, nor ever had one; she is a helper, but she plots and schemes; she has been excommunicated from humanity, but she does communicate with humans; she is a warrior, but a housewife too; she is 'dead', but also a living being; she roasts a little child in the oven, but the outcome has her being roasted herself...."
181. **Narrator:** Also, I read Gaétan Soucy in a language he doesn't speak.
182. **Narrator:** Soucy wrote "La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes" (The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond Of Matches).
183. **Narrator:** (Isolation, the grotesque, religious fervor, rape, fairytale aesthetic, big reveal)
184. **Ugrešić:** "Baba Yaga is a surrogate-woman, she is here to get old instead of us, to be old instead of us, to be punished instead of us."
185. **Narrator:** Have you considered flagellation?
186. **Narrator:** Behave, words.

what the garden stump said: In the Autumn of our Lord 7491 The people asked the children to come into the world again, to share in the things forbidden. They tell their Papa of houses with sixhands windows where families live one above the other and Papa cries “Good lord! What have they done? It is like the bees in the hives!” And it is good to see the children’s teeth all together. Then he asks the first question ever through his lips. He tells the people that he believes that men have sent fires into the sky looking very much like stars, but traveling faster. The people said this was so, and that men had flown to stand upon the moon. This last tale their Papa could not believe, and then he left the people be. “The moon is a heavenly body, who but gods and angels could fly there? Anyway, how could you walk and ride upside-down?” And we all prayed that things would never change. *And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life; Who proceedeth from the Father.* The children are not allowed any of this. They are hidden too far to go back now. Here they will stay, and die, as companions. The people brought dogs and we did not get on well. They gave the children cats instead to guard their seeds. When they left the children sent them away with rags of nuts—“the taiga will bear more.”

187. **Narrator:** The book *Lost in the Taiga: One Russian Family’s Fifty-Year Struggle for Survival and Religious Freedom in the Siberian Wilderness* became a bestseller in France in 1994, but never did well in England or the U.S. It is hard to imagine that Soucy did not read it in French, and take inspiration.
188. **Narrator:** Because there is little of that real fairytale not present.
189. **Narrator:** Also because I read one after the other.
190. **Narrator:** By now you must know I have the tendency to read signs.
191. **Scientists:** “They had carried a crude spinning wheel and, incredibly, the components of a loom into the taiga with them on a vessel they called ‘the Ark’—moving these as they gradually went further into the wilderness must have required many long and arduous journeys—but they had no technology for replacing metal.”
192. **Narrator:** Yagas have ideas, too.
193. **Ugrešić:** “She is a collective work, and a collective mirror. Her biography begins in better times, when she was the Golden Baba, the Mokosh. With the turn to patriarchy, she lost her power and became an outlawed horror who prevails through sheer cunning. Today Baba Yaga ekes a life in her hut like a fetus in the womb or a corpse in a tomb.”
194. **Yaga:** But those can be forgotten in the presence of young men.
195. **Yaga:** No matter how old, if the breasts are large enough...those eyes linger, just for a second, for the shadow of a vessel.
196. **Yaga:** Idea: The yaga is not the opposite of the infant.
197. **Ugrešić:** “Baba Yaga is a ‘dissident.’ excommunicated, reclusive, an eyesore, a failure, but she is neither alone nor lonely. In many mythic and ritual folklore traditions besides the Slavic ones, she has innumerable sisters.”
198. **Yaga:** I do apologize for abstraction, but I do not regret myself.
199. **Yaga:** I want a sword in hand at all times.
200. **Yaga:** To stab is an intimate action.

what the garden stump said: The Autumn of our Lord 7492. The children left my sights for the third time and walked down the mountain to visit the people in their homes. When the thin one returned she told me that to the world we should look all wild as digging bears, her Papa with his beard full of straws and two singsongy daughters, two scratching sons, in a house that is smothered by darkness in the afternoon. She speaks ill of the garden and will not listen. Threads of smoke in the wind gave us up to the machines, my scab of a garden like a hoof print on the taiga's back. When they came the children found new hungers. When they came they lost their way.

- 201. **Yaga:** I am trying to reach you.
- 202. **Yaga:** Come closer.
- 203. **Narrator:** At the end of *Lost in the Taiga*, Agafia is 40. But that was nearly 30 years ago.
- 204. **Ugrešić:** "Instead of Baba Yaga, the Bulgarians have the Mountain Mother (Gorska maika), who causes insomnia among little children."
- 205. **Narrator:** No garden stump sits beside the home of the Lykovs. Look there. In the pictures.
- 206. **Narrator:** Still, she is not safe under snow. It is men who find Agafia out in the taiga.
- 207. **Narrator:** About the geologist, Yerofei, who moved into a cabin beside Agafia's twelve years ago, she says, "It is best not to speak of it."
- 208. **Narrator:** Yerofei has one leg. The other froze off in the war. Now he walks on crutches and has a fake leg made of a single wooden pole.
- 209. **Narrator:** Agafia says, "He is not a good helper. He has lived with my help all these years." "No one needs him. So he isn't going anywhere."
- 210. **Narrator:** Then she invokes the biblical story of Susanna. "She was framed by elders and in the end they were punished. Her honor was restored by the prophet Daniel. The same thing happened to me."
- 211. **Narrator:** Vice keeps filming.
- 211. **Narrator:** "I had to stand tough from it. It happened two times. Once even when I was sick. I don't know what came over him. After that I could not sleep for several days and nights. I wanted to die of hunger."
- 212. **Narrator:** About this instance, *Vice* reporters write "It was hard to tell if Agafia's inscrutable but ominous comments hinted at something deadly serious or were just the product of two bickering senior citizens who've gone a bit crazy with cabin fever."
- 213. **Ugrešić:** "Baba Harca lives in the oven and steals stars out of the sky."
- 214. **Ugrešić:** "France's Arie has goose feet and iron teeth."
- 215. **Ugrešić:** "The Graeae were born old, they share one tooth and one eye between them."

what the garden stump said: In the Autumn of our Lord 7493 the September from Adam Dmitry suffered the shakes after coming down the mountain in the rain and helping Savin to set a fish trap without warming up and his shaking was like a thunderhead. The girls rubbed sulfur into his sores and fed him healthful, God-given plants, but they did not save him. When I line up my sins two by two in the night, I wonder if I could not have gotten my roots up out of the ground and showed them the herbs growing beneath the hill. I wonder if the people of the world could not have saved him then. But it was not what they desired. "A man lives for howsoever long God grants and no more." That is what Dmitry said, and in the new sun his eyes would not close. I am contented now, to have one forever in the ground alongside me to make good conversation sometimes.

216. **Narrator:** Mostly I is myself, by which I means a brain.
217. **Narrator:** Idea: The main difference is between those who survive catastrophes of wilderness isolation without eating the others who die first, and those who do not.
218. **Narrator:** Idea: The main difference is between those who begin by assuming the honesty of a victim, and those who begin otherwise.
219. **Narrator:** That body, all the flesh inside, wasted.
220. **Narrator:** This is not fiction, after all.
221. **Ugrešić:** "Unusual combinations of female and avian traits appear in Paleolithic cave drawings (Lascaux, Pech Merle, El Pindal): a beak instead of a mouth, a wing instead of a hand. In the well-known 'narrative' drawing of the dying man and a wounded bison, and the bird with a woman's face watching it all, some see the bird as a symbol of the soul leaving the man."
222. **Narrator:** If a woman makes a dying sound out in the wild.
223. **Narrator:** If a woman makes a praying noise.
224. **Fairytale:** Though she gnaws, she tears—her teeth are iron clad—Baba cannot pass out of the wood. Not now that she is old. And you wonder why she eats them.
225. **Narrator:** Not fiction, this fairytale. I confess I hate that word too.
226. **Narrator:** Is that a kind of real life?
227. **Narrator:** Don't think that nonfiction isn't this.
228. **Narrator:** What if you had never experienced a *meeting*?
229. **Ugrešić:** "Baba Yaga's reactions to women are misogynistic, and she is prone to excessive rivalry with young heroines."
230. **Ugrešić:** "She is evil to boys, she'll eat them up, but she is kind to young men, virtually submissive."
231. **Narrator:** What if a stranger had never *looked* at you?
232. **Narrator:** What if you had not *idealized the other*?

in winter: It comes to two arms deep and then a leg. Their Papa shovels the roof of snow so that it does not crack before March. At night under the moon the crust is bluer than any sky. The cold makes lace with the bark of trees like their Mama's needle once through a sleeve. The suns are slow to sink, and no eggshells rise to pile upon the garden stump. The trees stop their ringing and the river will not rise. Who can measure snow that holds no prints? The tail is slipping and the ledger is slick so we read the psalter as if we could not recite. When Papa and Dmitry come back upon skis their snow beards drip pools into the floor where the girls lay their heads at night. They seek the animals stiff in their traps—we must have a little meat. They eat nettles and chew their potatoes each for an hour and sometimes there is still only bread rusk to eat. They grow thin and their skins are just as the sheets beyond the hinges. They have only the stars to enumerate.

233. **Ugrešić:** "Baba Yaga's hut stands on either one or two hen's legs. These legs have prominent claws. The mythic importance of birds' claws dates from the Paleolithic to the existence of the Goddess, half-woman and half-bird."
234. **Narrator:** A girl, a girl!
235. **Narrator:** Girls are for looking at.
236. **Narrator:** Idea: Until rape is a useful word again, we will need the details in full.
237. **Narrator:** Do you want to play *witch in the barrel*?
238. **Ugrešić:** "In a well-made text, the reader should feel like a mouse in cheese. And that's not how you felt at all, is it?"
239. **Narrator:** If you think I means stakes, trials, Jeanne d'Arc, you may be missing somebody's point.
240. **Narrator:** Though they did use the same trials for cats and women alike. Some say cats do not behave the way a pet should. Some say they do not grovel deeply enough. Cannot be trained in absolution.
241. **Narrator:** Behave, cats.
242. **Narrator:** Send that cat outside.
243. **Narrator:** And why did the Lykov brothers have to live in a house six miles away from Agafia and her sister and father? Did something *happen*?
244. **Narrator:** Agafia has a few dozen cats, and a dog. The dog is named "Taiga." One cat is named "Little Drawing." This is her phrase for the written word.
245. **Narrator:** One hundred sixty miles from remote civilization, she still became that kind of old lady.

what the garden stump said:

The Winter of our Lord 7494 from Adam. The children have ailed much. How could they not? God is entrusted with their bodies, and only the taiga bares salves. Natalia binds their infusions of fungus and currant with loosestrife and wild onions and tansy like she learned from her mother who knew what herbs in the taiga can kill and which others will cushion a sickness. They boil nettles of their bites into tonic that hardens winter bones. They infuse origanum with wild marsh rosemary to right the kidneys when they rock.

The Strain has consumed everyone more than once consumed, and in its grip they twist inside like a stump never can. It comes from heaving racks of wood and too many buckets on a day without food. A person who is able must correct the stomach with massage and stiff fingers. When the teeth in their heads grow weak the children are healed by prayer, or by heating a new potato through and sinking their gums to its flesh until they cry out. When they are taken with a cold they lie on the stove and drink an infusion of nettles and raspberry seed. This sometimes does save them.

246. An Appeal from Agafea Lykova:

"February 10, 2011

The Metropolitan of Moscow received a letter from Agafea Lykova, an Old Believer living in the taiga. This recluse asks similar-minded people who have the ability and desire to leave the world and come to help her with her house and farm. Just over a year ago, another such request was posted on the archdiocese website.

'I bow to you before the damp earth, and I wish you from God good health, salvation and well-being, especially for those who [offer] rescue and welfare, and so be saved by the LORD God in the Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and paternal church [protected] until the end of this age from all divisions, heresies and foes...'

'With a great big bow to request of all: I need a man as an assistant, one whom I will not survive, [who] lives so not good, with weeks of being alone. Do not leave me for Christ's sake. Have mercy upon a wretched orphan, who is in trouble [and] suffering.'

'...People here [you] have a true Believer, the faith of Christ Believer, and people here I need firewood to cook, to mow the hay.... I have weakened health and forces.' "

247. Narrator: What sins does a spinster commit to get that way? What can she be doing? When she should be busy dying already.

248. Ugrešić: "Baba Yaga appears as a spinner and a weaver, roles which always symbolize power over human destiny. But also a warrior who sleeps with a sword over her head and fights, sometimes as a mother to dragons."

249. Narrator: Agafia faced a bear once, unarmed, and lived to tell of it. "I didn't have a rifle, an axe or a knife because it was a holiday celebration," she said, "It was just standing there, facing me. So I prayed to St. George. I began to sing the ninth prayer. Then it took off and fled into the forest."

what the garden stump said: In the Winter of our Lord 7493 from Adam the October, Savin sat down with a bellyache and did not rise again and the children laid him in the snow until spring when he joined those of us in the Garden. Natalia had minced by his side every moment before and she said, "I too, shall die of grief," and so she did, ten days hence. When God took her, she was in the thin one's arms, in the door to the house; Natalia last said, "I pity you. You are left alone." But the thin one's Papa is here, and the people of the world. It is only we three that the grief has not taken, and very soon now the last will come into my ground.

250. **Ugrešić:** "Even for most Slavic readers, she is just a hideous old hag who steals little children."
251. **Narrator:** Idea: A wild woman is irresistible.
252. **Narrator:** Idea: Maybe she is untouched.
253. **Narrator:** Idea: Maybe she does not know.
254. **Narrator:** Idea: How to contain her dugs.
255. **Narrator:** Idea: Maybe we can teach her.
256. **Ugrešić:** "I realize that this attack of textual claustrophobia was brought on by repetitious rituals from the world of folklore. Don't touch this, don't touch that; don't cross the threshold, step over it.... And how lucky you think you are, you're thinking, to live in a de-ritualized and de-mythologized world where a person can relax, kick off his shoes, put his feet on the table and twiddle his thumbs without fear of baleful consequences."
257. **Narrator:** Idea: All women should be taught/touched.
258. **Narrator:** Idea: To make those ideas dance.
259. **Narrator:** A show of hands: Who knows a hag?
260. **Narrator:** Agafia knows about barcodes now, from some of the food that is donated and brought to her. About them she says, "It is a sign of the antichrist." And "It will be imprinted on hands soon, and inside heads. That is the most petrifying thing. It will happen. The last prophecy will come true. Apocalypse."
261. **Narrator:** In my estimation, I have consumed about one thousand fairytales.
262. **Narrator:** At least five hundred in the past twenty months.
263. **Narrator:** Hans Christian, Grimm, Russian, American, European. As you know, this is how I make my bread.

what the garden stump said: The Winter of our Lord 7496 from Adam. By autumn's end the taiga had folded Second Garden back into herself and the thin one and her Papa built a new house for two on a pair of birchbow stilts. The people brought them imprints of Godmother, of Godfather and Dmitry, of those who are gone. All were there but for their Mama, who went to God before the people came. The people first took the children's faces from them when they arrived strung with black snip machines and Savin called it mischief. The faces from in the ground pained them deeply, but the thinnest tucked them down between my roots, away from the house where the divine image rests and it is only days until her Papa will die.

When I dream now it is that I am not alone. The yarn in the basket rattles like bones and three pairs of hands fly into the house for two and they mend and spin and sweep at the snow and the fire and the belly are never wanting. Outside the window stand bosom friends upon steeds breathing fog, and one is red as one is black as one is white. What they bring home from the hunting pit look like rabbits but are children and they spring into the oven and come out smiling and no years are the hungry ones. *Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spake by the Prophets; In One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.*

- 264. **Narrator:** Agafia and I would not agree on the place of women.
- 265. **Narrator:** But she is not oblivious to modern ways.
- 266. **Narrator:** Idea: It would be immoral to discuss or bring attention to Baba Yaga in conversation with any Lykov. Agafia most of all.
- 267. **Narrator:** Idea: it is as immoral to contact isolated peoples who originated from and shirk modernized cultures as it is to contact those who have no connection to them whatsoever.
- 268. **Narrator:** Idea: It is one thing to go outside in a down coat, with a thermos and kitchen timer. It is another to stare back inside in until your eyes water and your leg falls off.
- 269. **Narrator:** Every member of Agafia's family died, but Yerofei claims it was not from pneumonia like the Russian doctors say.
- 270. **Narrator:** Idea: Agafia has found two kinds of freedom before death. The first is that it is she who gives orders now.
- 271: **Narrator:** Even if her cats are sold at auction when she tries to send them to the Obamas.
- 272: **Narrator:** The second is that we are collectively afraid of everything she has ever been.
- 271. **Fairytale:** This tale is bound to the world as this nose between two rosy cheeks. A cry from the pines! Go home, as she says, send your children into the wood.

AUTHOR BIO



Sarah Minor is an essayist and designer from Iowa. She curates a series on visual writing at *Essay Daily* and teaches in Athens, Ohio, where she is a doctoral candidate in Creative Nonfiction. Her work appears, or is forthcoming, in *Conjunctions*, *Black Warrior Review*, *The Normal School*, *Passages North*, and *Pank*. She was recently awarded first place in *Hotel Amerika's* TransGenre Writing Contest.



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