

SLEEPLESS

A Fairy Tale Aroused by the Art of Vered Lahav

*Once upon a time: this means in fairy-tale manner not only the past
but a more colourful ... somewhere else.*
Ernst Bloch¹



nce upon a time ...

(but not so long ago) a girl was born into a very white castle, a castle as white as snow. When bored, she amused herself by looking at her reflection in the coolness of the mirror. Holding her white cat, Snowball, up to the mirror she saw a world the same as hers, where everything went the other way.

With her fondness for reversal, she preferred her name backwards (looking-glass style) and went by the name *Ɔǝǝǝǝǝǝǝǝǝǝ*. Backwards or forwards, her name was bookended with a *Ɔǝ* and a *Ɔǝ*. As a child, she wrote her favourite letter over and over. Like every child she was a little vain.

Ɔǝǝǝǝǝǝǝǝǝǝ had always been beautiful. Her skin was rice-powder white. Her eyes velvety black. Her pale cheeks alabaster pink. Her hair Rumpelstiltskin gold. Her tongue rare red amber. Her teeth tiny keys of ivory.

Curiously, even by age eleven, one of 'the most entrancing things' about her was that she still had all of her milk teeth.²

Was she to be the first girl to never grow up?



A boy who most certainly did grow up, standing next to the statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens.

'All children, except one, grow up.'
(J.M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*)

I. A HUNGER FOR DARKNESS

Ƨahal was the daughter of the Snow Queen. She was born into a land of great beauty and mystery. (There was no King and, even today, his disappearance remains a mystery.) Save for the merriment of Ƨahal, it was a quiet land. A white land. A frozen land. A sparse land. The Snow Queen's pet name for her precious daughter was Photogen (producer of light), but Ƨahal would have none of that.³ If the Snow Queen wanted an answer from her little Ƨ, valentine-girl, she had to call her Ƨahal.

'Ƨahal, Ƨahal, what would you like for your supper?'

'Would you like to have Dover sole in cream sauce or New England white clam chowder or fettuccine Alfredo or vichyssoise? Would you like to eat it with cauliflower or white cannellini beans or white rice or mashed potatoes or white asparagus or white bread? Would you like to drink milk or white tea? For dessert you could have coconut sorbet, vanilla pudding, meringues, marshmallows, white chocolate, angel-food cake with white rosewater frosting or rice pudding.' Ƨahal's puddings were often spiced with white cinnamon, to which some give the name 'Winter's Bark', or 'Winter's Cinnamon'.

The Snow Queen would only allow Ƨahal to eat white food. But she always offered her an impressive array of white desserts. Luckily, sugar is as white as snow, for Ƨahal had a voracious appetite for very sweet sweets.

Ƨahal had only six books. Not one of them had a title on its cover or spine. And all had formerly belonged to others. Curiously, and in the vacuous spirit of their covers and spines, most of the pages in her books were blank, save for little bits of words and some numbers. On the opening pages of her mostly blank books, Ƨahal found traces of what her books had once been: a few words from the publisher, pencilled-in prices from used-book sellers, and beautiful fragments of sweet nothings written by the giver of the book to his or her beloved.

Like an open secret, the prices (coldly calculated and indifferently written) told stories of some once-precious gift, now seemingly become almost worthless. These pencilled-in prices felt indecent in their intrusion on something so private.

These small fees (£3, £5, £6, £2, £1) for tokens of love, dedications, and titles-in-brief fed her hunger for words, even though the diet was very meagre. Ƨahal had an appetite for language, for the verse of numbers, for darkness.



But these books revealed no story nor verse in full, nor chapter, nor much of anything at all. Vahal's vacuous pages stood as empty as the scenery of the South Pole, as endless as the nought of the North Pole, as completely open as the Ocean Chart of Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*.



In one book, inked above a mirror image of a bouquet of flowers printed in crimson, was '*Flowers for Mrs. Becke*', signed 'A.W.B. 31.12.58'. Vahal imagined that this dedication must have been written as a loving tease, a disguised flirtation, by Mrs. Becke's passionate, if rather formal, husband.



In another book was written, in dark ink on white paper turned a little brown, a little toasty, like a madeleine cake: '*Madeleine, from Brent. 26 April 1955*'. But the Snow Queen never fed Vahal madeleines, which were far too brown. And, Vahal certainly knew nothing of Marcel Proust and the madeleine memories he made famous. In fact, Vahal had hardly any memories at all. It is hard to remember anything in a world so white. But at times she felt something awakening in her, a feeling that could have been a memory: something unnameable, unclassifiable, something elusive that anyone outside the Snow Castle might have called 'shadowy'.

Deprived of fully worded books, and fed so very few words, it was a mystery how Vahal could read. It was as if she were living without any food at all, not even white food. For to read is to eat, as in '*Thy words were found, and I did eat them*',⁴ or as when Alice found a little cake on which currants spelt out the words 'EAT ME'.

Vahal's six old books without their story, poetic verse, or history, were like a garden without flowers. As Tennyson once wrote in an 1832 'Sonnet': '*From an old garden where no flower bloometh*'.⁵

This line, of course, was unknown to Vahal. Her six books contained nought but pages and pages of nothing, nothing, nothing at all.

However, Vahal did know by heart two lines, though only two, from Tennyson's 1832 'Sonnet'. For, lovingly written in pale grey graphite in one of Vahal's otherwise very vacant volumes could be found these lines from that very verse: '*But yet my lonely spirit follows thine, / As round the rolling earth night follows day.*' The verse appeared below the tightly typed lines that famously introduce all Everyman's Library books: '*Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide, / In thy most need to go by thy side.*' And, just as Vahal had no knowledge of the origin or author of her sonnet lines, she could not know that her Everyman lines were from a 'medieval morality play'.⁶

In spirited unawareness, Vahal kept Tennyson's words of longing (as pencilled in grey) and the wise, moral, words from the Dark Ages (as typed in black) as a loving couple close to her heart. And often they rolled off her tongue.



Vahal loved all of her blank-paged lovers' books. But perhaps her favourite was the one that began with three letter 'X's inked in red: three cherry kisses. When Vahal saw these 'X's she understood them as a doubling, a mirroring of her dearly loved 'V' – one atop the other. In her mind, an 'X' was a pair of kissing 'V's, perhaps even an image of two people kissing: like the Prince bowing low to bestow an awakening kiss on Briar Rose. Not only did she love the triple 'X's in red, she loved the red satin bookmark. The volume's crimson tongue gave Vahal an irresistible urge to gently lick the creases of the binding, to smell every page, to caress its white paper leaves, to get right into it, to eat its invisible words printed in invisible ink. She wanted to drink the black milk.⁷



In her castle of white light, to which she was bound, *ʾOahal* never learned of the night. For the Snow Queen, unbeknownst to bright, vivid *ʾOahal*, illuminated the castle with artificial light, long before night's twilight. The Snow Queen had taught *ʾOahal* to sleep in the light of the night.

II. SLEEPLESS

Although *ʾOahal* slept, you might say she was sleepless.

To never sleep with darkness is not to know sleep, is not to know life.

Her world was completely diurnal with no understanding of night. The nocturnal was as foreign to her as, well, boys. For, all of the castle's gardeners, who were experts in white flowers; and all the cooks, who were experts in 'white cooking'; and all the cleaners, who wore white gloves which were changed every day to keep them white; and all the Princess minders, who each wore a white apron and had always set up the children's room for *ʾOahal* to play in with her white toys; and all the seamstresses, who were careful never to run out of white buttons or thread, all of them were women.



ʾOahal had never read a whole book and had never seen even a bit of a boy.

Vahal had never read a whole book, had never seen a boy, and had seen very little darkness, save for her own velvety black eyes and her mother's birds. The castle was filled with beautiful – often quite dark, even black – birds. Within the castle walls, the Snow Queen had released her favourite birds – magpies, house martins, blue tits, robins and blackbirds – all of them caught by her servants. (You might have thought the Snow Queen's favourite birds would have been white doves, but they were not.)

Vahal had never read a whole book, had never seen a boy, had seen very little darkness, save for her own velvety black eyes and her mother's birds, but she had seen quite a lot of light-filled blue. The castle ceilings, as high as the sky (at least they seemed to be), were painted an illuminated cerulean. The castle sky was the same colour blue that shines through glaciers on a sunny day, that intense, unworldly blue-green found in Polaroid pictures.⁸ The colour of the castle's 'sky' was Polaroid blue. (Fitting, given that Polaroids were the first photographs to be developed without a darkroom.)

Vahal had never read a whole book, had never seen a boy, had seen very little darkness, save for her own velvety black eyes and her mother's birds. Vahal had seen quite a lot of light-filled blue, but she knew nothing of the green of leaves or the brown of bark. The Snow Queen's gardeners had managed to supernaturally grow all of their plants with white leaves and stems, their trees with pure white peeling bark. It was the finest 'white horticulture' ever known.

Vahal's little world was the white of her mother's desired utopia. It was Le Corbusier in the hands of a Snow Queen.

But, unlike Le Corbusier's lovely 'castles' with their banks of windows, the castle had no glass for Vahal to look out through. The Snow Queen had cleverly concealed all of the castle's windows behind undetectable shutters, made to look just like the white walls of the castle. The entry door, too, was well-hidden; not unlike the door in The Queen's Chamber at the Château de Versailles, through which Marie-Antoinette managed to escape in 1789. But rather than being covered in glorious, golden, floral brocade, the Snow Queen's door was, of course, tastefully white, imperceptible, and seemingly seamlessly fitted.

For a long time, it never occurred to Vahal, even abstractly, that where she lived sleeplessly was a fortress and beyond its walls there could be a world of difference.

Even the birds, themselves as sweet as Vahal, who lived with the Princess in her brightly lit world, had adapted to *eterniday*⁹. Confused, at first, they used to sing all day and all night. But later they found secret dark places in the white trees cultivated by the Snow Queen in the great castle.

The only flowers Vahal knew were grown in white pots of all sizes. Tiny pots sprouted miniscule forget-me-nots and daisies of a most delicate white variety. Medium-sized pots held white scented gardenias, jasmine and tulips. Large pots held giant Easter lilies, white, bearded irises and heirloom white roses, the kind that smell like the roses of old, including climbing 'iceberg' roses. The only trees Vahal knew were grown in great whitewashed crates: dogwood trees with their simple, cheery white flowers; magnolia trees with flowers that look up like waxed fairy houses; and Gabriel's Trumpet trees with their magnificent upside-down flowers that hang like paper lanterns in summer. There were white peach trees and white cherry trees and spring-snow crab apples. It was as if the castle were an orangery, without oranges; a great glasshouse, without glass. The Snow Queen instructed her gardeners

to force the trees and plants and vines to bloom in staggered stages so that within the castle the season appeared to be an endless, if emotionally cold, summer. As it must be for a snow-white arctic hare the coolness – of mood rather than temperature – in the castle felt warm enough to Vøahal, for she'd known nothing else. Like everyone else in the world, even those secluded in castles, Vøahal was 'born into the wrong world, but for some reason – salvation, moral well-being, pleasure, genetic transmission–' she tried 'to make the most of it'.¹⁰ And the Snow Queen, despite her attachment to Vøahal, was simply cold-hearted.

Full-bloom summer, without the starkness of a winter without flowers; daylight without the darkness of night, meant the pleasures of this world of a castle with a sky (the very opposite of the utopian dream of a 'castle in the sky'¹¹) was simply 'play acting'. One cannot celebrate summer without winter. One cannot celebrate lightness without darkness. The Snow Queen was using the pleasures of white 'to cover'¹² what she did not want to acknowledge or remember: like snow over a grave, like snow over blood, like snow over and over and over.

As Vøahal began to grow into a young woman 'Vø' was still her letter, her mark, her scratch, her sign, her womanhood.

The summer she turned twelve (although it was always summer, wasn't it?), with her hair (grown darker from growing up, but still shot through with gold) still braided and bound by white elastic, Vøahal looked down her dress and discovered the 'VøVø's of her budding breasts and her soft, new hair at the 'Vø' between her two thighs. Her garden was new and its flowers 'bloometh'. She spent hours staring at herself in her silvery mirror with its white frame.

She would follow with her finger the elegant structure of her rib-cage, where the heart fluttered under the flesh like a bird under a blanket, and she would draw down the long line from breast-bone to navel (which was a mysterious cavern or grotto), and she would rasp her palms against her bud-wing shoulder-blades. And then she would writhe about, clasping herself, laughing, sometimes doing cartwheels and hand-stands out of sheer exhilaration at the supple surprise of herself now she was no longer a little girl.¹³

But one thing she never seemed to notice was that her body barely cast a shadow in her bright white world. One thing she would not know until later: 'a mirror becomes the entrance to the underworld'.¹⁴



When she was not looking down her white slip for the latest developments in pink and black, she kept her nose down in her blank books. She had a desire for the books she'd never read, but would have loved, perhaps 'Vasilla the Fair', the Russian version of 'Sleeping Beauty', or Marguerite Duras's daring modernist retelling of it, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*,¹⁵ and certainly plenty of Chekhov.¹⁶

She had never read 'Little Red Riding Hood', but she was beginning to feel she had.

And when her nose was not down her dress, or down in her books, it was up in the sky of the castle with the magpies, house martins, blue tits, robins and blackbirds. When Vahāhā looked up at the sky of the castle, she saw her feathered friends in flight as one unfolded 'V' after another: V V V.



When she looked down at her open book, she saw a large letter V opened up to her eyes and her imagination: V.

Vahāhā is famous, well, nearly famous, for coining the proverb which begins, 'If birds could read and books could fly ...'

III. EVIDENCE¹⁷

It was soon after Vahāhā turned twelve that things started to become strange, bizarre, even more surreal than living in a totally white, minimal, world.

Within twelve weeks, Vahāhā had lost all twenty of her milk teeth, which were immediately and magically replaced by her thirty-two permanent teeth. She simply went to sleep one bright night and by morning she had a dazzling new smile. Her fresh teeth were impressive. Her bright new central incisors, lateral incisors, canines and molars didn't look like the tiny tracks of a little vole in the snow, they were now more like the tracks of an arctic fox. Along with the drama of her new teeth, Vahāhā's lips had become fuller, moister, richer in colour: not red, but certainly a light pink that spoke of red.

Losing all of her milk teeth was frightening for Vahāhā. Nevertheless, the experience left her feeling exhilarated with a sense of anticipation, perhaps of wanting to bite into something that was not white...



Vahal saved all of her teeth and secretly shrouded them in a special white doily, made with her own hands. The little teeth in the white doily were then further protected in a plain white paper envelope. (Of course, any letters sent from the castle to the outside world were kept hidden from Vahal. But her mother the Snow Queen often left notes to the servants in such an envelope: orders or Vahal's white meals, or lists of white flowers to be planted.) Mesmerized by the bits of dried blood at the root of each tooth, Vahal sometimes sucked on them. She had a hunger for the taste of the blood.

Vahal kept the envelope of teeth under her pillow. (They were souvenirs of her former self, seemingly another girl.) But of course there was no tooth fairy in this Winterset disenchanting land.

One day, Vahal woke up in the morning light (which was, of course, the same as the night light) and was stunned to see a red rose in bloom. And then another. And another. The gardeners could hardly keep up with these mysterious red blooms that blossomed overnight. The shock of seeing so much red sent Vahal into a near-catatonic state of ecstasy: religious, sexual, sweet, and on fire.

The castle was hurriedly returned to its former, white, floral splendour and Vahal, at least temporarily, returned somewhat to her old self.

Not long after the incident with the red flowers, dead birds were found on the castle floor.

During the hours when Vahal slept, the servants would sometimes open the secret shutters and gaze out of the windows at the night. On one such night the servants opened the castle shutters to a sky so lit by the moon that it drove all the birds wild with a desire to escape. But the birds could not understand the transparency and hardness of glass. One after another, they crashed into the windows and fell dead to the floor.



Discovering one bird after another, Vahal whispered to herself, 'Were the birds trying to read? Is this evidence of books flying and birds reading while I was asleep?'



The darkness of their stilled bodies on the white floor of the castle, so unlike their fluttering shapes high up in the heavens of the Polaroid-blue sky, made *Yohal* gloomy and paler still. She became unusually bored and strangely desireless: not even wanting anything to eat, not even a marshmallow or a meringue or a dob of whipped cream. The servants (who loved *Yohal* very much) were devastated to learn that they had not managed to find all of the dead magpies, house martins, blue tits, robins and blackbirds before the Princess woke in the morning.



Yohal felt as empty as a winter nest, as empty as the gorgeous nests the dead birds had left behind, without eggs. She thought about life in a nest: 'a place of comfort that is not soft'.¹⁸ *Yohal*, the clever, mysteriously learned girl, who had never read an entire book, continued her philosophy: 'A nest may be a masterpiece, but life within it is limiting.'¹⁹

The white palace of the Snow Queen had turned particularly wintersome.

Yohal cried for the first time, for the first time ever in her life. Her tears were not clear, they were white, like milk.



If you were to look at them closely with a magnifying glass, as you might a snowflake, only to discover its structure to be a 'magnificent flower or ten-pointed star',²⁰ you would find that every perfect tear Vahal wept was an iconic memory of glass and feathers in tribute to the fallen birds. For the first time, Vahal not only cried, she had tangible memories.



One evening, hours before the start of the never-dark night, twelve weeks after the loss of her milk teeth, twelve days after the blossoming of the red roses, twelve hours after finding the fallen-dead magpies, house martins, blue tits, robins and blackbirds, and just twelve minutes after crying downy white feathers encased in glass, Vahal heard the faintest rapping, tapping sound. The muffled sound came from somewhere beyond, perhaps beneath her.

Trying to track down the sound without calling attention to herself, Vahal walked quietly in her unsoiled bare feet across stained white and polished clean oak floors of the castle.



When she found herself smack-dab at the centre of the sound, she saw that she was standing in the middle of a trapdoor. Although she had no experience of trapdoors, she did know of cupboard and bedroom doors. The floorboards of the trapdoor quivered ever so slightly as the muffled sound of anxious cries and heavy breathing became increasingly urgent.

She then saw the camouflaged white hinges. She also spotted a curious white niche, just the size to slide one's closed hand into, palm up. A little like the interior of a mitten, but like the floors of the castle and the trapdoor itself, it too was made of oak, stained white and polished clean.

Vahal pulled open the trapdoor and immediately fainted at what she saw: the dark.

IV. VESPERS' BLACK BOY

When *T*oahal awoke, all she could see was black nothingness. She was so frightened she could hardly breathe. But in her ear and in her heart she felt the whisper of something else unknown: a boy. It was Nycteris.

Nycteris was also twelve, but unlike *T*oahal he was dark. His skin, the colour of dark chocolate. His hair, black ivory. His eyes, a blue so deep they appeared to be black. His world was sunless and he liked to listen to those song cycles by Modest Mussorgsky, called *Sans soleil* (1874).

Nycteris smelt strange and musky, perhaps from never seeing the light and eating a diet of black.²¹ From black plates rimmed in dark crimson, Nycteris had plenty of dark, slow time to eat. His ideal dinner would go something like this: turtle soup, Russian rye bread, ripe Turkish olives, caviar, salted mullet roe, smoked Frankfurt black puddings, game in gravies the colour of liquorice and boot-blackening, truffled sauces, chocolate caramel creams, plum puddings, nectarines, preserved fruits, mulberries and heart-cherries.²²

He liked to accompany his black dinner with drinks from dark-coloured glasses, including 'the wines of Limagne and Rousillon, of Tenedos, Val de Peñas and Oporto'.²³ He liked to finish the meal with a 'coffee' and a 'walnut cordial'. Finally, he would top it all off with 'kvass, porters, and stouts'.²⁴ He was insatiable and had a very black and very sophisticated palate.

Nycteris had not had such a fine black meal as that for well over three months, not since the day his mother the Night Queen had died. She was called Vespers. 'Her eyes were black, with long black lashes; her skin had a look of darkened silver, but was of the purest tint and grain; her hair was black and fine and straight-flowing; her features were exquisitely formed, and if less beautiful yet more lovely from sadness; she always looked as if she wanted to lie down and not rise again.'²⁵

Vespers the Night Queen had always been terribly afraid that the evil Snow Queen would take Nycteris from her, along with her black castle and black tulips and black sapphires and black swans. Fear caused her to never let even a sliver of light leak into their dark, enchanted, world. It was as if they lived in a large, gorgeous, box camera: if any light were allowed to enter it would spoil their pretty, if entirely imagined, world of vigilantly-framed pictures. They developed their life in a dark room. They scrupulously and slowly lived out their life on black paper pages, with not even the tiniest scrawl written in white ink. They told all of their stories in black. Just as *T*oahal lived on the creamy blankness of the 'Ocean Chart', Nycteris lived on the blackness of the famous page in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.



Nycteris, like \mathcal{V} oahal, was brought up in a land of great beauty and mystery. (There was no King and, even today, his disappearance remains a mystery.) Save for the merriment of Nycteris, it was a quiet land. A black land. A warm land. A dense land.

The only light Nycteris knew was that of the stars, when Vespers let him look out of the window at the dark night sky. (Nycteris also fed himself on moonlight, but Vespers was very strict about the portions: no full moons ever, just a smidgen of waxing or waning gibbous, or the merest sliver of waxing or waning crescent.) But it was the starlight that fed him. In fact, Nycteris collected falling stars, the way some children collect nests. How they came to him is a mystery. His stars looked like food, as if they were made of treacle and candy brittle and Golden Syrup. They fed his heart.

One day, Vespers did lie down and never rose again.

As soon as the Snow Queen heard of Vespers' death, she arranged for her servants to kidnap Nycteris. She would not stand for him continuing his mother's legacy of evenings, dusks, nights, winters, all things beautiful and dark.

She was determined to *illuminate* all traces of Vespers.

The Snow Queen wanted to rid everywhere of the lightless hours, of gloom, of murkiness, of shadows.

But, when \mathcal{V} oahal pulled open the trapdoor, the Snow Queen was at the other end of the castle, castigating the cooks who had recently been adding colour to the food. Of late, the Snow Queen had been mortified to find chopped dill in the sour cream, a candied cherry atop vanilla ice-cream, chopped Kalamata olives garnishing the fettuccine, a sprinkle of dark cocoa floating on hot sweetened milk. The Snow Queen had no idea her 'Photogen' was in the arms of Nycteris.

The Snow Queen had not heard the whispers between Vespers' boy and \mathcal{V} oahal.

The Snow Queen could not see that the brightness of \mathcal{V} oahal was illuminating Nycteris's underground world. The Snow Queen could never have accepted that her daughter's eyes were adjusting to darkness. \mathcal{V} oahal liked being Proserpine.

In Vesperish whispers, Nycteris told \mathcal{V} oahal of things that till then had been unimaginable: that there was darkness throughout the world; that he had grown up in a dark, loving castle; that he had a plan to get out; that a kind servant had given him a key that could lock and unlock the secret door of the castle.

Just as Nycteris was showing \mathcal{V} oahal the key, the Snow Queen appeared like a huge white shadow of ice. At the top of her lungs, she chillingly screamed, 'Lights out!'

For the first time ever in the remembered history of the Snow Queen's castle (a rather blank memory, given the whiteness of it all), the switch was pulled and the castle was plunged into complete darkness.

The Snow Queen might have gone about things differently had she thought for a moment about how long it would take her eyes to adjust to the black.

Having the advantage of nocturnal vision, Nycteris, key in pocket and pulling \mathcal{V} ahal behind him, quickly scuttled up the ladder leading his 'light girl' out of her little Hades. Panting and frightened, with Nycteris as her Virgil, her Orpheus, her darkly guide, \mathcal{V} ahal and her newfound boy left the Snow Queen and ran towards the door of the great castle. Their bad luck of being so soon discovered was instantly outshone by a wondrous firefly that, being as frightened as they were, also wanted to get itself free of the castle. Given how strict the Snow Queen was about insects, it was a miracle that this one had found itself in the white, now dark, castle, flashing its greenish-yellow light. It was not even summer in the outside world, it was winter. The firefly was a true mystery.

Fireflies find mates by speaking to one another in their own complex language of radiant flashes. This one was alone and looking for a female. The firefly was following a streak of light, the thinnest of the thin, which was now leaking in through the mostly invisible keyhole of the great door of the castle. Perhaps, he thought (as if he were Briar Rose waiting 100 years for her Prince) this light is 'the one'.

Outside, was the evening twilight. The last light of the day was inviting this exiled firefly out through the keyhole.

With \mathcal{V} ahal in hand, Nycteris ran as fast as he could behind the firefly. The Snow Queen could not see Nycteris in the dark, but she could see her 'Photogen' and chased after the two adolescents running together as day follows night.

The Snow Queen was just steps behind them.

When the firefly arrived at the slim ray of light that leaked through the keyhole, he could not glide through, but buzzed and banged against the lock. Without a blink, Nycteris pulled the key from his pocket and miraculously stuck it into the lock. He succeeded first try, and taking no time at all he turned the key to the left. (The servant who gave Nycteris the key had explained that the pin-tumble of the lock had been installed backwards and to unlock the door, it had to be turned the wrong way, against habit. Nycteris, so smart in his darkness, had remembered this detail.) The door flew open and the firefly flew out.



But that was not all.

Ƨahal, too, was brilliant.²⁶ Just as Gretel tricked the witch into climbing into the oven first, then shut and bolted the iron door, Ƨahal ran out through the newly unlocked castle doorway into the twilight with the Snow Queen at her barefoot heels. But Ƨahal ran with the full intention of scampering back in. And Nycteris stayed behind.

Their unspoken plan worked.

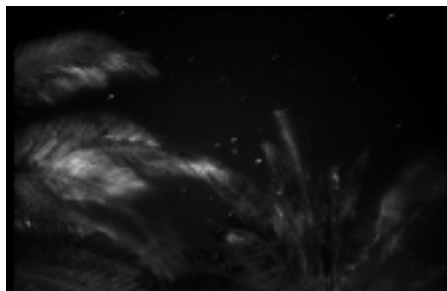
They slammed and locked the door. They locked the Snow Queen out. Within a moment, the Snow Queen burst into millions of tiny, cold snowflakes, each one 'a magnificent flower or ten-pointed star'.

Even today, every snowflake has a little piece of the Snow Queen in it. So be warned: it is fine to catch snowflakes on the tip of your tongue and swallow them, but be careful never to get one in your eye. Sometimes, it can keep you from finding the darkness. And without darkness, we can know no joy.

V. TWILIGHT

Toward dusk may be the best time to tell stories
Ernst Bloch²⁷

Nycteris and Ƨahal ran through the castle opening all the shutters and looking out its great windows. For the first time ever, Ƨahal saw dusk, the end of the evening twilight.²⁸ She saw *her mother*, the Snow Queen, now a fall of snow in the dusk.



Later that night, in the true dark of the winter's night, Nycteris told Ƨahal of shooting stars. He told her stories of summer skies and how the August sky let loose falling stars, like snow. As Nycteris spoke, Ƨahal felt as if she had always known his love, which was reaching her now 'like the delayed rays of a star'.²⁹

Nycteris and Ƨahal were not star-crossed lovers. They were not Romeo and Juliet. (*From forth the fatal loins of these two foes, / a pair of star-cross'd lovers, take their life.*) They lived to tell the tale.

Still later that night, Nycteris showed Ƨahal his own black castle and his collection of fallen stars: some of which were suspended on wire as if caught in the midst of their flight. They shone in the light of Ƨahal.



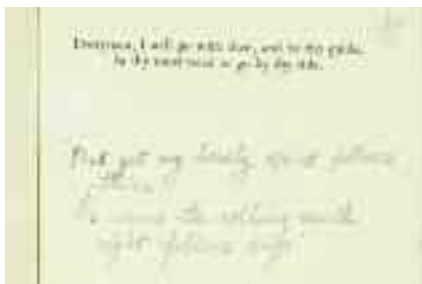
Over the coming weeks, Vahal and Nycteris connected the Snow Castle and the Night Castle with giant cordage onto which huge globes of glass beads were strung. Never again would light be out of touch with day. Like Vahal's glass tears filled with downy feathers, these 'lovers' beads' were also an iconic memory.



In the nights and the days that followed, Vahal ate red pomegranates and black plums. She no longer wore only white. She read books to her heart's delight. Vahal read *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* over and over. Vahal read 'Vasilla the Fair' over and over. Vahal visited Chekhov over and over.

And, still today, Nycteris and Vahal live in harmony *'as round the rolling earth night follows day'*.

That one little blank Everyman book of long ago had been a prophecy of what had always been, of what was meant to be.



Professor Carol Mavor, 2009

¹ Ernst Bloch, 'Better Castles in the Sky at the Country Fair and Circus, in Fairy Tales and Colportage', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 1988), 168.

² Of course it was Peter Pan who first entranced us by never letting go of his 'first teeth'. See J.M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, in Oxford World's Classics, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens and Peter and Wendy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 77. For a discussion of Peter's eternal boyishness, including his trademark 'milk teeth', see Carol Mavor, *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J.M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust and D.W. Winnicott* (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 163-251.

³ This fairy tale inspired by the art of Vered Lahav also took its inspiration from traditional fairy tales: most notably, Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Snow Queen', in *Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tales*, a new translation by Tiina Nunnally, edited and introduced by Jackie Wullschlager, 175-219; and, especially George MacDonald's 'The Day Boy and Night Girl', in *Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves*, ed. Jack Zipes (London: Methuen, 1987), 177-208. Both tales have elements of the photographic, with their emphasis on 'freezing' life and the play between light and dark.

⁴ 'Jeremiah 15:16', *The Bible*, King James Version, <www.biblegateway.com>

⁵ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Sonnet, 1832*, in *The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. William James Rolfe (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1899), 943.

Me my own fate to lasting sorrow doometh:
Thy woes are birds of passage, transitory:
Thy spirit circled with a living glory,
In summer still a summer joy resumeth.
Alone my hopeless melancholy gloometh,
Like a lone cypress, through the twilight hoary,
From an old garden where no flower bloometh,
One cypress on an island promontory.
But yet my lonely spirit follows thine
As round the rolling earth night follows day:
But yet thy lights on my horizons shine
Into my night when thou art far away.
I am so dark, alas! And thou so bright,
When we two meet there's never perfect light.

⁶ As is explained on the website for the Everyman's Library, currently published by Random House <<http://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/classics/about.html#>>:

Everyman's Library was founded on February 15, 1906 with the publication by Joseph Dent (1849-1926) of fifty titles. Dent, a master London bookbinder turned publisher, was a classic Victorian autodidact. The tenth child of a Darlington housepainter, he had left school at thirteen, and arrived in London with half-a-crown in his pocket.

Dent promised to publish new and beautiful editions of the world's classics at one shilling a volume, 'to appeal to every kind of reader: the worker, the student, the cultured man, the child, the man and the woman', so that 'for a few shillings the reader may have a whole bookshelf of the immortals; for five pounds (which will procure him with a hundred volumes) a man may be intellectually rich for life.'

Milton's words, 'A good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured upon purpose to a life beyond life' were printed on the title-pages of the first two Everyman volumes. However, Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* and every Everyman title ever since has carried the motto, 'Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide, in thy most need to go by thy side' from the medieval morality play, where the character Everyman is comforted by another character, Knowledge, as he sets out on a journey, long, hard and dangerous.

⁷ The concept of 'black milk' is famously from Paul Celan's 'Death Fugue', in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: Norton, 2001), 30-33.

⁸ The photographer Esther Teichmann has pointed out to me the particular blues of Polaroid photographs.

⁹ The American artist Joseph Cornell uses the term 'eterniday' often in his diaries. Richard Vine defines the term as 'Cornell's much-repeated designation for a fusion of the timeless and the daily'. See Vine's essay, 'Eterniday: Cornell's Christian Science "Metaphysique"', in *Joseph Cornell: Shadowplay, Eterniday*, with essays by Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, Richard Vine, and Robert Lerhman, commentary by Walter Hopps (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 40. The 'timelessness' of this term is exemplified when on 2nd March 1965, Cornell writes of purchasing T.S. Eliot books for his recently deceased brother, Robert, and the strange, recently murdered, young woman of Cornell's infatuation. Joyce Hunter: 'Here now in sunny Eterniday – I am remembering you – blessed Joyce ... Just now on Main Street I have bought a T.S. Eliot book for you and one for Robert.' See Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Works of Joseph Cornell* (New York: MFA Publications, 1997), 303. To see a reproduction of this diary page, see the Smithsonian Archives of American Art's On-line Collection of their Joseph Cornell Papers, 1804-1986 (bulk 1939-1972), Collection Series 3: Diaries, Diary Entries, March 1965. (Box 8, Folder 27), <<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/cornjose/series3.htm>>

¹⁰ Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 37.

¹¹ See Ernst Bloch, 'Better Castles in the Sky', n. 1.

¹² Adam Phillips, from a lecture on W.G. Sebald entitled 'Celebrating Sebald', given at York University, UK, on 24 June 2009. Readers of Sebald will note the visual connection between Lahav's series of videos and photographs of eyes in the series *Curiosity* (2009) and Sebald's *Austerlitz*. In discussing 'the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers', Sebald reproduces two photographs of the eyes of two different men. Sebald's cropped, horizontal black-and-white bands resonate with Lahav's own. For Sebald's images of the eyes and corresponding text, see Austerlitz, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001), 5.

¹³ Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (London: Virago, 2008), 1. First published in 1967.

¹⁴ Ernst Bloch, 'The Fairy Tale Moves on its Own Time' as collected in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, 164, n. 1.

¹⁵ Jennifer Waelti-Walters compares *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* to 'Sleeping Beauty' in *Fairy Tales and the Female Imagination* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1982), 58-76.

¹⁶ Vered Lahav has been highly influenced by Russian literature and has a particular fondness for Chekhov.

¹⁷ Vered Lahav has a body of related work, not in my 'story', entitled *Evidence of a Fairy Tale* (1998), which revolves around an article 'found' in The Times newspaper, that provides evidence of real fairies found in Gloucestershire. The artworks consist of photographic images of cocoons, a pair of wings, a girl's smock and a boy's shirt, the latter with cut and stitched openings for 'fairy' wings.

¹⁸ From a conversation with Vered Lahav.

¹⁹ From a conversation with Vered Lahav.

²⁰ Hans Christian Andersen, 'The Snow Queen', 179, n. 3.

²¹ George MacDonald, 'The Day Boy and the Night Girl', 178, n. 3.

²² Joris Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, translated by Margaret Mauldon, edited with an introduction and notes by Nicholas White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11-12. As cited in Michel Pastoureau, *Black: The History of a Color*, translated by Jody Gladding (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 169. First published in French as *Noir, histoire d'une couleur* by Michel Pastoureau (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2008).

²³ Joris Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 169, *ibid*.

²⁴ Joris Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 169, *ibid*.

²⁵ George MacDonald, 'The Day Boy and the Night Girl', 178, n. 3.

²⁶ The point here is to emphasise that the female heroine of this fairy tale is not passive, nor is, necessarily, Sleeping Beauty. As Maria Tatar writes in her edited collection of fairy tales *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* (New York and London: Norton, 2002), 96, 'the quintessential female heroine of fairy tales, Sleeping Beauty is the *fabled* passive princess who awaits liberation from a prince. Deprived of agency, she resembles the catatonic Snow White, who can do nothing more than lie in wait for Prince Charming. Yet this *cliché* about fairy-tale heroines overlooks the many clever and resourceful girls and women who are able to liberate themselves from danger.' (Emphases are mine)

²⁷ Ernst Bloch, 'Better Castles in the Sky at the Country Fair and Circus, in Fairy Tales and Colportage', 168, n. 1.

²⁸ One definition for 'dusk' given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 'the darker stage of twilight before it is quite dark at night'. And, as the *OED* reveals, just as 'dusk' means 'dark from absence of light; dim, gloomy, shadowy; dark-coloured, blackish', the origin of the word and its phonetic history is also 'obscure'.

²⁹ Susan Sontag as quoted by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). First published in French as *La Chambre claire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980). Barthes is speaking of how the light of the missing being of a photograph (in this case his beloved mother) touches one with past light in the present. As he writes: 'From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmissions is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star.' (8-81) In French, '*D'un corps réel, qui était là, sont parties des radiations qui viennent me toucher, moi qui suis ici; peu importe la durée de a transmission; la photo de l'être disparu vient me toucher comme les rayons différés d'une étoile.*' (126).