

Conversation Pieces
Volume 30

The Bone Spindle

Poems and Short Fiction

by

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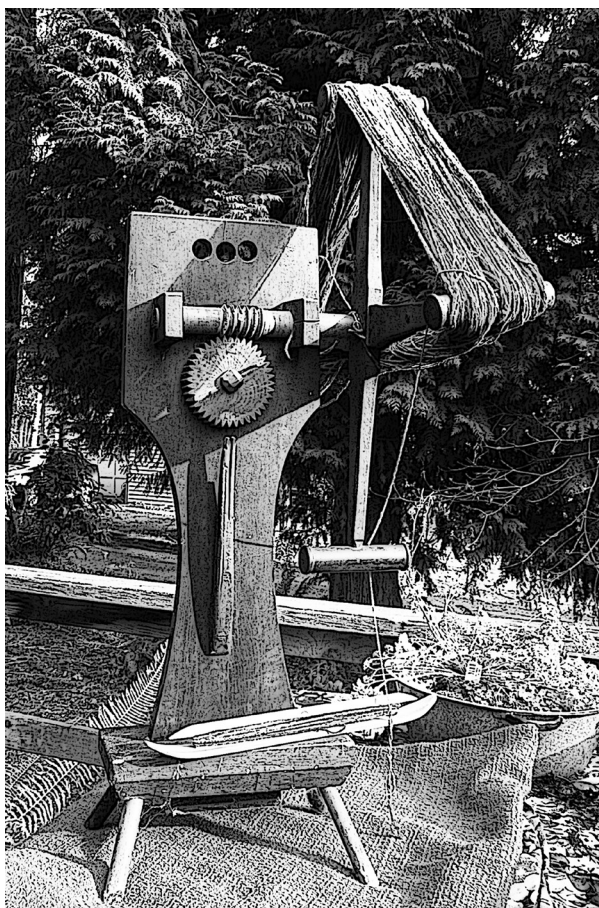
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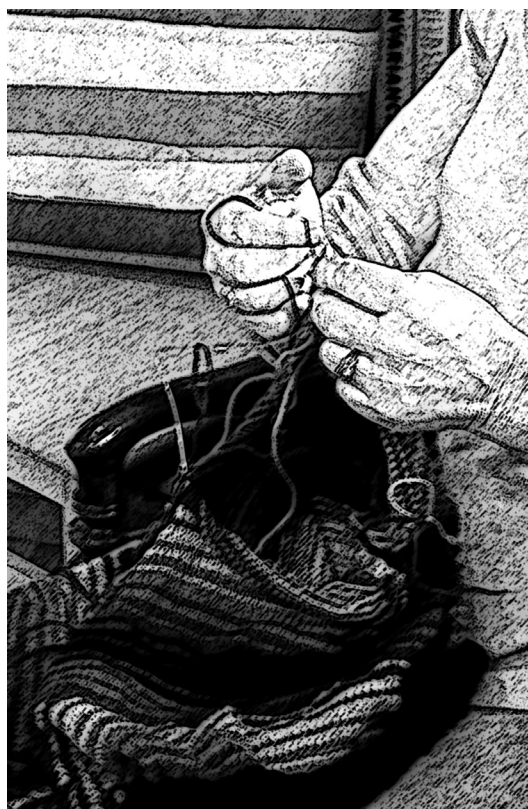
The song we had last night...is old and plain;
The spinsters and the knitters in the sun
And the free maids that weave their thread with bones
Do use to chant it...

Twelfth Night, Shakespeare



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THE KNITTERS OF PARIS, 1780

All the women knitted. They knitted worthless things;
but the mechanical work was a mechanical substitute
for eating and drinking.

Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens

No, not worthless things
though they weren't purling and cabling
the names of condemned elite
like Mme. Defarge with her endless muffler.
Cousins and in-laws sent them
wool-colored wool from a countryside
where sheep grew fat.
The knitters of Paris were not fat.
With fingers dry and split
they mottled the yarn with blood.
Hands damp with sweat or tears
held iron needles
and stained the gray with rust.
They were hungry.
They prayed for *égalité*
and dreamed of powdered heads in the dust,
but they had husbands and mothers,
shivering elderly friends
and children. They knitted
what must be knitted:
socks and blankets and shawls
and fingerless gloves.



THE FATES AT WORK

A One-Act Play for Three Old Spinsters

The (Fates) are regularly represented...as spinners...called Klotho (the Spinner); Lachesis (the Apportioner); and Atropos (the Inflexible)...the thread they spin is, or has on it, the destiny of each individual in turn, and when it is broken, a life ends.

A Handbook of Greek Mythology, H. J. Rose

LACHESIS: The cave is dry and pleasant,
torchlight sufficient for our work.

ATROPOS: Twist and join,
twist and measure...

LACHESIS: It's just a job, but we do it right,
we do it well. Good life or wasted,
good death or cut-down-in-the-prime,
king or homeless cripple,
we do our work. Year after year,
century after century,
broken spindle after rusted shears...

ATROPOS: Measure short, measure long...

KLOTHO: A girl from down the hill
brings us just the right wool
from a flock that never sickens or dwindles.
She has—the one who serves us now—

the thickest, blackest braids!
And such blue eyes—
though one is turned amiss.

LACHESIS: Age after age, ignorant girl after
 ignorant girl—

KLOTHO: She cleans and cards it,
 brings us baskets full of fleece.
 White or grey, ivory or black;
 it doesn't matter, though
 I rather like the creamy grey.

ATROPOS: Twist and measure, cut.
 Twist and join and stretch and snip.

KLOTHO: For her, whichever her,
 however poor and foolish,
 there is a chance of joy!
 Enterprise! And finding out!
 Or rough warm hand upon the breast.
 Even the taste of grief
 seems as if it might be sweet...

LACHESIS: Not for us, these mortal crumbs!
 What we do is more
 than wine and figs,
 more than smiles and tears
 and fire between the legs.

KLOTHO: (More than wind upon the face?
 More than song? More
 than hand in hand?)

LACHESIS: All day, every day,
 we are about our task together.

We do not bicker. We do our job.

KLOTHO: (All she does is hold the finished thread
pretentiously between two hands,
pondering her heartless power.
I'm the one who works!
The one who learned the special twist,
the endless twist that makes a life—
the twist I mastered long ago...)

ATROPOS: Twist and measure, snip.
Snip. Snip.





THE THIRTEENTH FAIRY

“And when eleven of them had had their say, in came the uninvited thirteenth, burning to revenge herself...”

“The Sleeping Beauty,” *Household Stories by the Brothers Grimm*, translated by Lucy Crane.

Finding myself uninvited
to a party at the castle
was usually no surprise
or grounds for outrage.
But to presume I had no gift
worthy of a princess? The others—
beauty, manners, perfect pitch—
were puny by comparison.

So it pleased me
to haunt the royal parents
with fifteen years of curse.
And when at last the baby girl
had grown to be a lovely maid,
the king was fool enough to think
his anti-spindle laws
had been enough to quell my magic.

She did look odd
in all her splendid satins
amid the dust and cobwebs,

but she took to spinning at once—
a knack that usually takes weeks
to master. I was charmed,
and nearly nixed the curse—
sweet to be the teacher of one
who'd grow to be a queen!

But I saw the gift meant nothing to her.
Already dreaming of princes,
she imagined love worth more
than woman's skill,
believed one hundred dreamless years
fair payment for a perfect kiss.



SPIDER YARN

“Anansi’s home was in the villages and forests of
West Africa.”

Anansi the Spider Man, Philip Sherlock.

Anansi was a tricky old man
and a manly spider.
He fooled everyone,
even Death. He murdered
Nobody, so he could sleep
with Nobody’s wife.
He wove a bag to keep
his Good Sense in,
and once he spun a sticky ladder
through the clouds
with a fairy, a leopard,
and a jug of hornets on his back.
The Sky God had asked this price
for All the Stories
and Anansi paid.
He could have sold them.
He could have traded them for fame
or a summer’s worth of lady spiders.
But he climbed down
to his backwater village
and opened God’s Golden Box.
The stories rose
and spread like woodsmoke.
This is one.