

The Atra Virago Or The Vargus Barking Spider

Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds

I was barely ten years old when I became the keeper of an atra virago, more commonly known as the vargas barking spider. But I had to let him go, for I could not compete. My atra virago was given to me by a hobo, in exchange for a pint of peel liquor, which I milked off one of ma's stills the same evening. If I had been just a little stronger, I know I could have healed him. The exchange went as it should have, although I sensed it was a solemn moment for the hobo. The way in which his hands trembled as he handed me the fatty skillet, barely able to hold down the lid, betrayed a certain sensitivity that was rare amongst the hobos, who in the main were a worthless, roguish lot. I made for my spider's home an ingenious coop. This is how: Listen.

I found in the pile an old hubcap and a battered kitchen colander that put face to face fitted perfectly, and formed a slightly flattened globoid with solid bottom, and heavily perforated ceiling, for breathing, and looking. I tore up a newspaper into even strips, and lined the hubcap with them, making a soft, springy floor. My barking spider was as big as a dinner plate and fitted the coop exactly. I fed him mainly on houseflies, with the occasional earwig or blue-bottle, and kept the coop under my bed for the first day.

I did not leave my room for three days and three nights. Late at night I would sit, hid beneath the covers like a fiend, the coop nestled snugly in my lap, a box of matches in my trembling paw. I would hold my breath, incline my ear and listen. After a time, there in the dark, I would find and strike a match along the side of the coop, holding it up close to the perforations, so that the dancing flame would cast its quivering light within. With lungs a roar from the acrid fumes I would draw to and peer in. Into the coop, and into those weird orbits. Those pits, those black water wounds, unblinking, fearless. And again, again. Dizzy with sulfurous air, again.

I believe I could have left this life by way of those damp, drugged pits; the mires of its eyes, those onyx pools. Dragged down by the pull of those dark lit spirals, for they held me, they did. Paralyzed. Numb. Blisters bubbled on fore and thumb. Little black cinders littered my sheets. I listened again, and again I peered in. On the fourth day I decided to shift the coop outside. The silence of the barking spider was destroying me. It was truly wondrous spider, jet black it was, its chordal region given over to a silky, ebony hair. Only its eyes flashed, but blackly too like raw coal or iced soot, blackly I say, and only sometimes. But always it shunned me. Never once did I see it move in the coop, never once did I hear it bark. First I thought it was the coop that displeased him, then I thought maybe he's just a mute like me. Next, waking in a cold sweat on the second night, I was haunted by another thought, a thought which hung heavy in my heart: Perhaps it was waiting for me to speak first...

Oh lonesome spider, if only I could have let you know.
Finally I took him outside, the coop in a pillowcase. I sat on the log near
the one armed gallow tree and I unbagged the coop.
The coop shone in the sun like a silver helmet, and spear of light did flash
upon it.
I checked for crows.
Opening the coop by way of halving it, I shook the spider from the hubcap and
a little strips of newspaper fluttered down like streamers.
Streamers and the corpses of a hundred insects like wedding rice about me.
My atra virago landed right side up, on his feet, in the manner of all dropped
spiders, or so I've found.
And without so much as a nod, my spider crawled the length of the log, and disappeared
into the cane.
And I sat there a while, just so, on the log,
and then after a while, also, I sauntered up the slope to the junk-
pile with nothing all that pressing to do.
And I tossed the two halves of the coop over and mulled around.
I roasted in the sun.