

HANSEL AND GRETEL

ANNE SEXTON (1971)

Little plum,
said the mother to her son,
I want to bite,
I want to chew,
I will eat you up.
Little child,
little nubkin,
sweet as fudge,
you are my blitz.
I will spit on you for luck
for you are better than money.
Your next as smooth
as a hard-boiled egg;
soft cheeks, my pears,
let me buzz you on the neck
and take a bite.
I have a pan that will fit you.
Just pull up your knees like a game hen.
Let me take your pulse
and set the oven for 350.
Come, my pretender, my fritter,
my bubbler, my chicken biddy!
Oh succulent one,
it is but one turn in the road
and I would be a cannibal!

Hansel and Gretel
and their parents
had come upon evil times.
They had cooked the dog
and served him up like lamb chops.
There was only a loaf of bread left.
The final solution,
their mother told their father,
was to lose the children in the forest.
We have enough bread for ourselves
but none for them.

Hansel heard this
and took pebbles with him
into the forest.
He dropped a pebble every fifth step
and later, after their parents had left them,
they followed the pebbles home.
The next day their mother gave them
each a hunk of bread
like a page out of the Bible
and sent them out again.
This time Hansel dropped bits of bread.
The birds, however, ate the bread
and they were lost at last.
They were blind as worms.
They turned like ants in a glove
not knowing which direction to take.
The sun was in Leo
and water spouted from the lion's head
but still they did not know their way.

So they walked for twenty days
and twenty nights
and came upon a rococo house
made all of food from its windows
to its chocolate chimney.
A witch lived in that house
and she took them in.
She gave them a large supper
to fatten them up
and then they slept,
z's buzzing from their mouths like flies.
Then she took Hansel,
the smarter, the bigger,
the juicier, into the barn
and locked him up.
Each day she fed him goose liver
so that he would fatten,
so that he would be as larded
as a plump coachman,
that knight of the whip.
She was planning to cook him
and then gobble him up

as in a feast
after a holy war.

She spoke to Gretel
and told her how her brother
would be better than mutton;
how a thrill would go through her
as she smelled him cooking;
how she would lay the table
and sharpen the knives
and neglect none of the refinements.

Gretel
who had said nothing so far
nodded her head and wept.
She who neither dropped pebbles or bread
bided her time.

The witch looked upon her
with new eyes and thought:
Why not this saucy lass
for an hors d'oeuvre?
She explained to Gretel
that she must climb in the oven
to see if she would fit.

Gretel spoke at last:
Ja, Fräulein, show me how it can be done.
The witch thought this fair
and climbed in to show the way.
It was a matter of gymnastics.

Gretel,
seeing her moment in history,
shut fast the oven,
locked fast the door,
fast as Houdini,
and turned the oven on to bake.

The witch turned as red
as the Jap flag.

Her blood began to boil up
like Coca-Cola.

Her eyes began to melt.

She was done for.

Altogether a memorable incident.

As for Hansel and Gretel,
they escaped and went home to their father.
Their mother,
you'll be glad to hear, was dead.
Only at suppertime
while eating a chicken leg
did our children remember
the woe of the oven,
the smell of the cooking witch,
a little like mutton,
to be served only with burgundy
and fine white linen
like something religious.