the Mirror

by Myrriah Lavin

I sit in a darkened room, with a single candle for illumination. Before me on the table lies the dark mirror into which I gaze for revelation. My vision becomes less focused the longer I stare until the mirror seems filled with clouds scudding over its inner surface. The clouds slowly part to reveal a figure, which beckons to me. I find myself inside the mirror itself. Where am I? In some misty region of my imagination accessed in trance, or is this a realm inhabited by angels, demons, and spirits of the dead?

From predynastic Egypt to China's Shang dynasty, from the temples of Aztec diviners to the stone towers of medieval alchemists, mirror lore has been whispered about, written into ancient grimoires, handed down through the folk beliefs of generations, and stitched into the fabric of fairy tales and myths worldwide. Down through the ages, mirrors have been gateways to other worlds; they have protected us from evil; they have told us the future and they have told us the truth; and they have reflected back to the viewer a glimpse of the human soul.

THE SOUL AS REFLECTION

The belief that the soul projects out of the body and into mirrors in the form of reflection underlies perhaps the most widely known mirror superstition: that breaking a mirror brings seven years' bad luck. Many believed that breaking a mirror also broke the soul of the one who broke it. The soul, so angered at being hurt, exacted seven years of bad luck in payment for such carelessness. The Romans, who were the first to make glass mirrors, attributed the seven years' bad luck to their belief that life renewed itself every seven years. To break a mirror meant to break one's health, and this "broken health" would not be remedied for seven years. The bad luck could be averted, though, by grinding the mirror shards to dust so that no shattered reflections could again be seen in them. The early American slaves adopted a less grueling way to deal with this kind of ill luck: submerge the broken mirror pieces in a stream of south-running water, and the bad luck would be washed away in seven hours.

In some cultures, the breaking of a mirror was thought to presage a death in the family within the year. This association of mirrors with death is common in folklore, and stems from the belief that the soul

could become trapped in the mirror, causing death. For this reason, young children were often not allowed to look in a mirror until they were at least a year old. Mirrors were covered during sleep or illness so that the soul, in its wanderings, would not become trapped and unable to return to the body. After a death in the family, mirrors were also covered or turned to the wall to prevent the soul of the newly departed from becoming caught in the mirror, delaying its journey to the afterlife. In Bulgaria, this practice warded off more sinister intentions -- that the soul of the dead person, lingering about its former home until the burial of its body, would carry off the soul of a living person whose reflection appeared in a mirror. Mirrors appear commonly as grave goods in Serbo-Croatia, particularly for those who die prematurely. These are the most "dangerous" dead, apt to roam from their graves and harry the living. Mirrors are believed to trap the soul of the deceased at the gravesite where it belongs.

The belief that the soul could be caught and trapped in a mirror appears in many other ways. The peoples of northern India considered it dangerous to look into a mirror that belonged to someone else. It was especially so to look into the mirrors of a house you were visiting: when you left, you would leave part of your soul behind trapped in the mirrors, which could then be manipulated by your host to his advantage. In 18th century India, women were seen to wave mirrors before the image of death goddess Kali, apparently to appease her need for human sacrifice with the reflection of a person rather than the sacrifice of a real human being.

THE VANITY TRAP

Water shares the mirror's reflective nature, and reflections in bodies of water appear at the root of much mirror lore. The soul was believed to be attracted to water, since it was seen to spring into any body of standing water near at hand. Macedonians leave a container full of water in an empty grave after exhumation to capture the soul and keep it in the grave, preventing it from following its bones, which have been moved to the church to allow its former grave to be reused. Jars of water are common sights in Bulgarian graveyards for much the same reason.

The ancient Greeks believed that water spirits, lurking in reflective pools, lakes, and streams, would drag the unwary reflected soul underwater, leaving the now-soulless person to die. These water spirits are strangely reminiscent of the mermaid, comb and mirror -- symbols of heartlessness and vanity -- in her hand. She

drags her captive lovers down to briny cities under the sea, drowning them on the way.

The Greeks' belief in malignant water spirits was probably the forerunner of the myth of Narcissus. This beautiful youth followed the hunt in the mountain forests, where the nymphs saw him and fell in love with his beauty. But he cruelly rejected them all. A nymph whom Narcissus had turned away prayed that he might some day come to know how it felt to be spurned. The gods heard her wish and granted it. One day, tired and thirsty from the hunt, Narcissus came upon a clear, unspoiled woodland fountain and stooped to drink. In the still, crystalline water, he saw an image of rare beauty that he took to be the fountain's resident water spirit, and he was smitten with love. He yearned after his love in the fountain's clear water, but received no response. Slowly, rejection overcame him, and he pined away and died. His body was never found -- in its place was the beautiful purple flower that now bears his name. It was told that when his soul crossed over the Styx, he leaned over the boat's edge for another glimpse of his love.

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MYRRIAH LAVIN has three black cats and one black mirror, and has recently taken up playing the fiddle.

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