

Duncan, Hal. "The Tomb and the Womb: Death and Rebirth in World Myth and Mythic Fiction." *The Journal of Mythic Arts Online* (2006): n. pag. Web. 30 Jun. 2014.

The Tomb and the Womb: Death and Rebirth in World Myth and Mythic Fiction by Hal Duncan



"Christ's Body" by William Blake

To the Cradle from the Grave

In *The Masks of God*, his study of comparative mythology, Joseph Campbell offers a description of Neanderthal burials which implies a strange equation of tomb and womb. Skeletons have been found, he tells us, "interred with supplies (suggesting the idea of another life), accompanied by animal sacrifice (wild ox, bison, and wild goat), with attention to an East-West axis (the path of the sun, which is reborn from the same earth in which the dead are placed), in flexed position (as though within the womb), or in a sleeping posture . . ." We can't know what stories the Neanderthals told around their fires, but the myths and fictions that survive from written history seem to make similar connections, linking "[s]leep and death, awakening and resurrection, the grave as a return to the mother for rebirth." Indeed when we talk of our ancestors as cavemen, of their era as the dawn of time, of the birth of humanity, we are constructing our own modern myth, with that cave as grave and cradle, a stony Paleolithic tomb and womb combined. We picture fire within that cave, symbolic spark of Promethean awareness ("Prometheus," in Greek, is literally "Foresight"). We picture, with Plato, humanity huddled round the fire, watching the flicker of light and shadow on the wall, trying to make sense of the shifting suggestions of form.

To die is to sleep, the myth seems to be saying, to be entombed among flickering dreams until we wake again. Sleep and death, birth and awakening, are fused in tales from across the world,

from throughout history. There's the Chinese legend of P'an-ku, for example, a primal deity who hatches from the cosmic egg only to die, his breath, his blood, his muscles and veins, all of him, becoming the substance of the world, the wind and the clouds, the strata of rock and earth, the rivers; his death is the birth of the world. There are the metamorphoses of Greek myths — Narcissus, Hyacinth, Daphne — where death is not an end but a transformation to a new life. There are folktales or fantasy stories which take the Hindu or Buddhist concept of reincarnation as a springboard. Anna Tambour's story "Strange Incidents in Foreign Parts," in *Electric Velocipede* #9 for instance, has a protagonist who dies and is reborn as an eggplant. Yes, an eggplant.

There's an animistic theme which informs these tales, a suggestion that death is only a dissolution of the individual back into the collective soul from which they came, from which they'll re-emerge in a new form. We tend to think of the Phoenix as the archetypal symbol of death and resurrection, to talk of rising, Phoenix-like, from the ashes. But the Phoenix which hatches from an egg incubated in fire is not the same Phoenix which builds that pyre of a nest, which dies upon that fire. That Phoenix dies so a new Phoenix can be hatched. If there is a sense of reincarnation, it is not as a restoration of the individual but as what the Buddhists would call a rebecoming.

Against these tales where rebirth is a rebecoming though, there are tales of resurrection, rebirth as a singular and seminal event, a moment of apotheosis for a unique redeemer figure — Jesus Christ or his fictional analogues, allegories like Aslan in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, or derivatives like Neo in *The Matrix*. When we tell the story of the stone rolled away from outside Christ's tomb with a painted egg rolled down a hill at Easter, we make a connection back to that old imagery of the womb and the tomb; that egg, in which a soul (or a symbol of the soul, a bird) is nascent, is rather reminiscent of P'an-Ku or the Phoenix. There is more than a hint here surely, in that painted egg, of nature's regeneration, of the dawn with its chorus of birdsong, or the Spring with its gaudy coat of many flowers. Note the darkness in the hour of Christ's death, the eternal winter from which Narnia must be saved; even the land is cold and dark . . . dead. The hero in these resurrection tales returns with the sun at his back and Summer at his heels, with light and warmth, with fire.

"The sleeper must awake," Paul Atreides hears during his melange delirium in the film version of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, a delirium which takes him to the verge of death and from which he awakens as a new man, the messianic Muad'Dib. Of course the sleeper must awake; in this tale he is the king, the great leader of his people, dead, lost, prophesied, or all of the above. He's King Arthur, in his Avalonian cave, promised to return in Albion's hour of need. He's the great giant Finn MacChuill, the sleeping spirit of Eire who James Joyce sought to stir with the weird words of *Finnegan's Wake*. He's the "Head Apollo" Philip K Dick claimed was "about to return" in his end-notes to *Valis*. Maybe even Gandalf, in his return from certain death, all clad in white, transformed in the crucible of his battle with the Balrog, has an air of the Anointed One to him.

Where tales of death and rebecoming offer a holistic view of a world of ephemeral forms in flux, tales of death and resurrection offer a promise that a hero can survive, that a person of destiny can harrow death, come out the other side. In Christian mythology we have the raising of the

dead out of the grave on the Day of Judgement — which is, of course, a tale of death and rebirth in its own right — but these resurrections are more than that. These are tales of heroes, conquerors, individuals who have the power to transcend death.

In reality such tales have a dark side.



"Charon" by Joachim Patenier

A Deal With Death

"I was better than them," the mass-murderer, Charles Starkweather said after a killing spree which left eleven people dead across Nebraska in 1958, later fictionalized in the film *Badlands*. "They killed me slowly," said Starkweather. "I killed them quick."

On a surface level this seems nothing more than the shadowy cool of the Eternal Villain, as played by Pacino or De Niro, a man without pity, justifying his atrocities with the cold calculus of self-interest. This bogeyman so beloved of Hollywood is a cliché now, instantly recognizable — Alan Rickman as a terrorist, Christopher Walken as a gangster, Rutger Hauer as a hitcher — as much a modern myth, in fact, not just a stereotype but an archetype. On a surface level we might see nothing more than psychopathy in his lack of empathy. But beneath the surface of these murderers the symbolic resonances ring the deeper, richer toll of a tale far older and far truer than any Hollywood schlockbuster. The thrill of the thrillers that they stalk through with impunity — until, that is, the hero or heroine arrives to turn their kingdom of slaughter upside-down — turns on our awareness of what these individuals are, what they represent . . . death.

What was missing from the movie of Starkweather's real-life tale, what is all too often absent from fictive representations of the Eternal Villain, is the sense of mystery that makes their menace more than just mundane. Here or there — in the slasher movie, say — the killer is represented as truly demonic (even if his only magical power is the ability to stroll casually and still catch someone running for their life), but in *Badlands* there is no mention at all of the

most fascinating element of Starkweather's tale: how in the years leading up to his killing spree, the would-be murderer, spending days in the desolate hills around his hometown, had a series of . . . experiences where Death, he claimed, came to him in the form of a man with the head of a bear; Death took him down through the flames of Hell, golden flames which were beautiful, which did not hurt at all, and, as in some narrative of fantasy or folklore, struck a deal with him.

"They killed me slowly; I killed them quick," Starkweather said, casual as regards his inevitable execution. As far as he was concerned he was already dead; had been through Hell, and was now deputized by Death to do his work, to send as many souls his way as possible in exchange for preferential treatment in eternity.

This deal with Death is the same deal offered the vampires of much contemporary fiction — most notably in Anne Rice's *Interview With a Vampire* or Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*. Underneath the Gothic intrigue and adolescent angst, the repressed sexuality of the vampire's bloodlust, at the core of the modern vampire is the transformative empowerment that comes from acceptance of death, rebirth as a sort of Homo superior, a being who, in passing through death and coming out the other side, has moved beyond humanity's fragile mortal state.

The appeal of this trope may be, in part, as a compensatory fantasy for the disempowered, the weak and the weird dissociated from their peers (socially dead) and dreaming of demonic revenge (the rebirth of release), but it would be glib and dismissive to see it as only that. Death is a discrete state; the tales of vampires, the self-mythology of a Starkweather, these are not just stories of the weak become strong but of the dead reborn. The psychological state mapped by the metaphoric death should be correspondingly discrete, not simply misery (however profound) but a categorically distinct sense of self. "I'm dying here," does not express the same sentiment as "I'm dead."

The rebirth of the vampire as a being of acute senses and even more acute hunger — an overwhelming desire to consume life — gives the clue to the state metaphorised as death in these myths and fictions; Starkweather's, the vampire's, the psychopath's death, each is a death of the soul, a destruction of the ability to care. Rebirth is a restoration of desire. In the TV series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, vampirism is rendered explicitly in these terms; when a human becomes a vampire their own soul is destroyed; the demon they become is born from that destruction.

Intriguingly, psychologists distinguish schizophrenia into two stages, acute and chronic, the former a state of wild psychosis, visions and voices, the latter a state of cold affect-less delusion in which the patient often sees himself as a dead thing. The acute schizophrenic, hounded by demons, might well be seen as the all too real psychological truth underlying those heroic descents into the netherworld. We might well be reminded of a Sumerian tale of death and rebirth, that of Dumuzi, doomed and on the run, fleeing the demons sent to drag him down into the netherworld, into his own unconscious. If death is sleep, sleep is psychosis. The chronic schizophrenic, the vampires of legends, the Starkweathers of reality — serve as reminders that not everyone returns intact from that dark realm.

But these are stories where the rebirth is incomplete; the human-become-demon may be empowered in their new state but they are not truly restored to life, undead rather than reborn. Such tales illuminate the death-and-rebirth motif, but they only tell half of the story. Nevertheless, they're an important reminder of the darkness of the tomb, a warning as we approach the gates of Hell that this journey is no adventure to be taken lightly. The ferryman, Charon, in Greek myth, must be bartered with before he'll take a living being across the river Styx; the living do not belong in Hell.

So Death's minions — the vampires, the psychopaths, the demons — stand at the gates like the three-headed dog Cerberus who blocks the path to Hades, living signs that if we pass we may not ever truly, fully return.

Abandon hope, they say, all ye who enter here.

The Stripping of the Flesh

In "The Descent of Inanna," one of the oldest myths we have of death and rebirth — one with such staying power that modern fantasists such as myself or Catherynne M. Vallente are still drawn to retell it — the Sumerian goddess Inanna, Queen of Heaven, hears the call of the "Great Below" from her throne-room in the "Great Above." A feisty, ambitious girl with a string of abandoned lovers behind her and her gaze set on the destiny in front of her, she gathers her objects of power and, on "the road of no return," descends into the Kur, where Ereshkigal, Queen of the Dead, rules a city of dust and ash.

Like the Greek netherworld, Hades, the Kur has its gates — seven of them — and a keeper to warn away the unwary. Inanna gains entrance to this Hell under false pretenses, and as she enters through each gate she is stripped, item by item, of all her symbols of power and royalty until she stands in Ereshkigal's throne-room, "naked and bowed low," whereupon she is seized by the Anunnaki, chthonic spirits of the ancestral dead, and scourged, hung on a hook like a wineskin.

The ancestors act similarly on shamans of the Siberian Tungus. Joseph Campbell quotes one such shaman, describing the transformation he underwent after lying sick for an entire year: "My ancestors appeared to me and began to shamanize. They stood me up like a block of wood and shot at me with their bows until I lost consciousness. They cut up my flesh, they separated my bones and counted them, and they ate my flesh raw."

The Greek god Dionysus, suffers a similar fate: seized by Titans, torn limb from limb, and boiled in a cauldron to be feasted upon; rescued and restored by his grandmother, Rhea. His epithet Dithyrambus — "Twice-born" — might just as easily relate to this as to the variant tale where his second birth is from Zeus's thigh. The female followers of Dionysus wreak this same savagery upon any beast or man who crosses their path. King Pentheus, in Euripides's *The Bacchae*, spies on their rituals and is ripped apart by his own mother. Orpheus meets the same grim end. While the stories have the latter murdered for preaching against the cult, Robert Graves considered his death a sign that Orpheus represented, originally, the initiate of the Dionysiac mysteries, his ordeal a record of ancient rites that sound not unlike the shamanism described by Campbell.



"Death of Orpheus" by Albrecht Durer

If we want a modern version of this dismemberment and reconstitution, it's tempting to look to the Marvel comics character, Wolverine, who, in a hidden base in the wilderness, has his bones removed and replaced with an adamantium skeleton by the unfeeling elders of modern magic — scientists. Surly, cynical and cigar-smoking, his past life tokened with the dogtags of the dead soldier, there's something of the shaman, perhaps, to that suspect and suspicious outsider. It's a fanciful idea but isn't the superhero the flip-side of the vampire, an archetype of rebirth just as the latter is an archetype of death? With the obvious exception of Superman and a few like souls, the superhero usually has their origin story of being transformed, often by some near-death experience. Batman is driven to remake himself by his encounter with death — the death of his parents — at an early age, but better examples can be found in Spiderman or the Hulk. Again and again we see radiation or some similarly lethal force as the cause of the empowering transformation. Where the vampire's rebirth is incomplete, with the superhero it is the death that is incomplete, their old self not destroyed but living on in tension with the new identity, an emblem of the normalcy they've lost.

Buffy seems to carry all these elements of the death-and-rebirth tale. Those elements are out of sequence and revised as the story-arcs progress, but it's interesting to see how the retro-continuity reconstructs the story towards the underlying myth. Buffy's superhero status is established with an origin that's less transformation than awakening; we're given to understand, at first, that she is born with her powers, the chosen one of her generation, simply

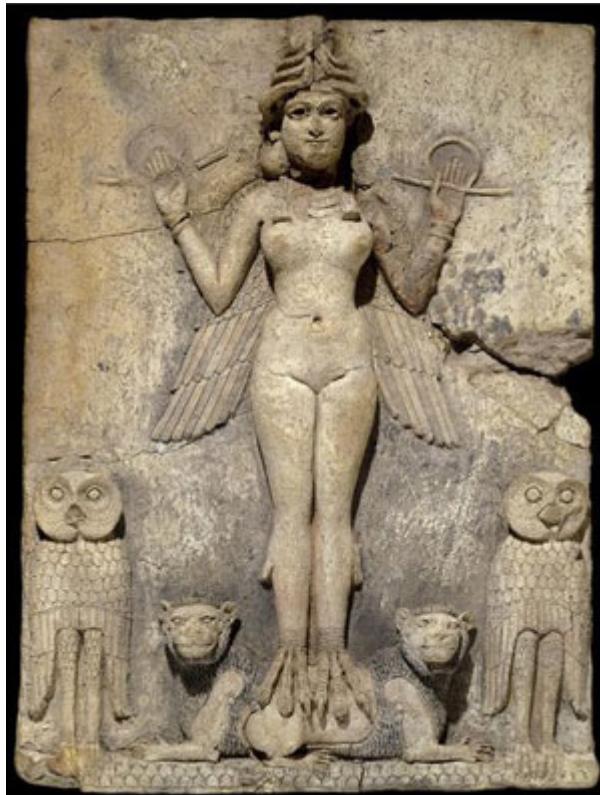
unaware of them. Later in the series, however, we learn that these powers are transferred to the new slayer when the old slayer dies (and we learn this, mind, after Buffy herself dies and is brought back to life). Later still we learn that the slayer is herself demonic, when Buffy, in a vision, confronts the ancient elders, the ancestral spirits, who made a deal with the powers of death, binding a demon into the original slayer in a magical ritual. After another death and resurrection we're even shown a Buffy who identifies with the very creatures she hunts, her world a living Hell because she is as dead to it as they are, no longer quite human, no longer capable of emotional engagement.

It is as if the simple set-up of a little girl going face-to-face with the forces of darkness is striving to expand into the old pattern, as if the melodramatics of Buffy's mundane adolescent miseries — of her heartbreaks and hardships — are reaching to become the mythics of Inanna's flesh being stripped from her body — of her harrowing of Hell.

Lamentations

In "The Descent of Inanna," it is only the pleas of her loyal maidservant to the god Enki that lead to her release, Enki sending emissaries to bargain with Ereshkigal for her freedom; they win Ereshkigal's favor with sympathetic laments for the sheer misery of being Queen of the

Dead; when she offers them a boon they ask for the corpse of Inanna.



Freedom from Death, though, comes at a cost. Inanna walks out of Hell with demons at her back, following her from town to town as she visits each of her dutifully mourning sons in turn. Finally she arrives in Uruk where her lover, young Dumuzi, lazes under a tree of golden apples, luxuriating in his shining robes. With a hellion wrath, Inanna curses the shepherd-boy turned king and the demons pounce; they seize Dumuzi, to drag him down to take her place in Hell.

Inanna's tale is possibly less familiar to the reader than the comparable Greek story of Persephone, abducted by Hades, god of the underworld, to be his wife. Persephone, often referred to as Kore (the Greek term for "maiden") was so beautiful that Death claimed her for his own, a mythic echo, perhaps, of the sentiment voiced by many attempting to console those who

have lost a loved one "before their time."

A less dynamic character than impetuous Inanna, Persephone is the passive victim in this version of the tale, but the differences in the tales only highlight the similarities. Demeter, her mother is the Earth goddess, whose grief for Persephone is so consuming that the world itself

is made desolate, as she refuses to let the grain grow. The loss of Persephone thus brings drought, famine, unending winter; similarly, the absence of Inanna, goddess of the grain store and the date palm, results in an infertile world where "no bull mounted a cow, [no donkey impregnated a jenny]," and much of the Inanna story is taken up with the lamentations of her maid before various gods, bemoaning the desolation.

To the scholars of the Victorian period it seemed obvious that these tales were echoes of ritual sacrifices required for the replenishment of the world — divine blood shed to fertilize the earth — or more abstract articulations of the cycles of nature. We need only look at the Aztec god, Xipe Totec, who died each year and was flayed, found to be gold beneath his skin, like the maize shelled after harvesting. His death was re-enacted in rituals with priests wearing flayed skins of sacrificial victims, touching individuals with defleshed bones to magically impart fertility. To the Victorians it seemed obvious that gods or goddesses die and are reborn because they represent the sun which dies each dusk and is reborn each dawn, or the moon which dies each month and is reborn three days later, or the greenery of the earth which dies each winter and is reborn each summer.

Even before texts were discovered to confirm this then, it was assumed that Inanna's lover Dumuzi returned from the netherworld himself on an annual cycle, spending half the year in the netherworld and half the year free, just as his Greek counterpart Adonis spent his summers on earth with Aphrodite before returning to his other lover, Persephone, below. The comparable symbols made the comparable structures obvious; and eventually it was confirmed with the discovery of texts showing that, yes, Dumuzi was indeed reborn.

However it would be reductionist to take these tales as animistic agricultural allegories and nothing else. One might equally well argue the reverse, that the cosmic action is a metaphor for the human action, that the desolation and regeneration of the earth can just as easily be read as an example of the Pathetic Fallacy, the Romantic device of projecting a mental state onto the external world. It may be a modern error, true, reading these tales of death and rebirth outside of their ancient context, to see the story as more psychological than seasonal, but a major component of these tales is the lament of the living for the dead and, whether voiced by Inanna's maid or Persephone's mother, this could point us towards a more sophisticated reading of these tales as explorations of grief.

We have already mentioned Dumuzi and his flight from the demons of the netherworld. His tale is told in the poem "Dumuzi's Dream," picking up where "The Descent of Inanna" left off, with the demons seizing the gentle shepherd-boy to drag him down to the netherworld. It is in the link between the two tales — the demons who shadow Inanna and who become the hellhounds on Dumuzi's trail — that we can see something deeper than a mere allegory of nature and fertility. Those demons, the *ugallu*, are pitiless creatures; fatherless, motherless, they recognize no bonds of family; neither eating nor drinking, they have no appreciation of the joys of life. They are like chronic schizophrenics devoid of affect. They are dead men walking, the Starkweathers of Sumer.

This is where these tales of death and rebirth become personal, psychological, because those demons are, one might say, Inanna's own rage unbound. They are the hatred and resentment

of that which still lives. They are grief for the death of one's own soul. They have no emotions because they are the emotions.

The All-Great God is Dead

Plutarch tells a story that, in the reign of Emperor Tiberius, passengers on a ship sailing for Italy from Greece, heard a voice coming from the distant Isle of Paxos, calling on the pilot of the vessel, Thamus, Thamus, Thamus. This voice went on to tell the pilot that, when they sailed by Palodes, he was to lean out over the side and call three times:

"Pan is dead, Great Pan is dead."

When he did, the story says, the sailor heard a loud lament rise up, the sound not of one voice but many.



"Hypnos and Thanatos (Sleep and Death)" by John William Waterhouse

To the Christians this story was a symbol of the death of the old pagan gods with the birth of a young Jewish pacifist anarchist who was himself to die eventually on a wooden cross, with nails in his hands and thorns around his head. But the story itself is like the voice from Paxos, faint and distant and perhaps misheard, if the name of the pilot is, as it may be, of more significance than the theologians of the church assumed.

"Tammuz, Tammuz, Tammuz, the all-great god is dead," cried the initiates of a dead and resurrected god of grain and vine, bread and wine, who predates Christ by a few thousand years.

Tammuz is simply the Akkadian name for the Sumerian Dumuzi. In "Dumuzi's Dream," as mentioned, we see this shepherd desperately trying to escape his fate. Like Dionysus trying to escape the Titans, Dumuzi tries shape-shifting, becoming a gazelle at one point, later a snake, but like Dionysus he is eventually captured. As with the stories of Inanna and Persephone much is made of the lament for his loss, the weeping and wailing of his mother and sister in his absence.

Much should be made of these laments; the laments for Tammuz are, like the laments for all such gods, the appeals for his return, appeals which, so the tales say, might just work. Sometimes they do; sometimes they don't. In Norse myth, Baldr, fairest of the gods, loved by all, is protected from all harmful things except the mistletoe. Loki finds out about this weakness and tricks the well-meaning but simple-minded Hothr into killing his own brother with a spear made of the stuff. Hel, goddess of the underworld, promises to free Baldr if all objects alive or dead will weep for him, but the refusal of a giantess sours the deal; even so Baldr will be reborn after Ragnarok, so we are told (just as Finn will wake, Arthur will return, and Christ will have his Second Coming). Tammuz, like Baldr, was so well loved that even in the Old Testament we see the women of Jerusalem wailing for him. Like Christ and Baldr (and unlike Finn and Arthur), Tammuz is an innocent, a god who harms no-one, who brings only joy. In one version of the tale, the demons that chase him are soldiers, Tammuz a draft-dodger, as much a pacifist as any early Christian.

It's even possible — if speculative — that this same Tammuz is recorded in the New Testament in the form of the apostle, Judas Didymos Thomas, who gets two of his names, it seems, from words for twin — the Aramaic *te'oma* and the Greek *didymos*. In Gnostic tales this Thomas is described as the double of the dead and resurrected Christ. Given that Tammuz entered Greek myth as Adonis, son of Myrrha, by way of Phoenicia where he was known simply as Adon, or Adonai, which is to say "Lord," one has to wonder. Is it possible that Tammuz is in fact, to some extent, recorded in the Gospels in their central character, in Christ himself? The family resemblance is remarkable, if we squint our eyes and cock our heads, between the humble shepherd Tammuz, who died at the hands of soldiers, and another Adonai, son of Mary, born on Mithra's birthday, reborn from death in the spring, just like some ancient deity of fertility. One of the favorite subjects of Renaissance painting, so favoured that it earns its own name, the pietà, is the image of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Christ. Fleeing across the Mesopotamian steppe, Dumuzi sobs of how his mother will weep for him.

As has been pointed out by many comparative mythologists, the figure of Mary, Mother of God, owes more than a little of her character, in terms of attributes and epithets, to Isis and the other mother-goddesses of the ancient world: "Seat of Wisdom . . . Vessel of Honor . . . Mystical Rose . . . House of Gold . . . Gate of Heaven . . . Morning Star . . . Refuge of Sinners . . . Queen of Angels . . . Queen of Peace." This is the same Isis, moreover, whose husband, the great god Osiris, is murdered by the evil Set and cast adrift in a coffin, searched for and brought back by Isis only for his body to be hacked into fourteen pieces and scattered. A number of incidents in the story of Isis's search for her husband correspond exactly with the story of Demeter's attempt to find out what has happened to her daughter, Persephone. Intriguingly then, when Osiris was born, according to Lewis Spence, "a loud voice was heard throughout all the world

saying, 'The lord of all the earth is born'." Was that the same voice that announced Pan's death, one wonders?

The women of Jerusalem wailing for Tammuz, the people of Paxos mourning Pan, Isis sobbing for Osiris, Mary cradling the corpse of Christ — in all of these we see grief and the heartbroken hope of moving Death himself to let a lost loved one return. Orpheus pulled it off, after all, descending into Hell and pleading for the return of his Eurydike, with a song that moved the stony heart of Hades, played on the sympathies of Persephone; Eurydike lost the freedom Orpheus won for her on a technicality, but the nature of that technicality is illuminating: Eurydike looked back. In the confused and confusing psychodrama, in this swirling imagery of death and hell, of descent into dreams and delusions, it seems significant that what traps a soul in the underworld is such a simple action clearly redolent of regret.

Is there a secret in these tales of death and rebirth then? That they are not about the dead at all, but about the living, grieving survivors, about their descent into a hell of rage and sorrow, about the cold and hollow shock, the desperate dreams and delusions that the dead might return, oh please, that they might just return from that maze of death?

A House of Sorrows

Mark Z. Danielewski, in his *House of Leaves* (Doubleday, 2001) gives us a modern myth of this maze of death, in a text as layered and labyrinthine structurally as it is symbolically. Introduced by an LA waster called Johnny Truant, and footnoted throughout with his own psychological descent, the book purports to be an editing-together of scraps found in a trunk which, together, form a book about a non-existent documentary film telling the story of the exploration of the house of the title. This house, we quickly discover, is larger on the inside than it is on the outside. A door in an exterior wall opens into a long corridor which sits where a flowerbed should be and — in fact, if one looks out of the window beside this door — actually is. The corridor leads down into impossible depths, cavernous spaces.

What makes Danielewski's book a truly resonant work is that his house is not simply a magical realm to be adventured through, with a monstrous tyrant to be slain, a true love to be rescued, a prize to be won. He makes a point of saying there is no minotaur in this maze; this is not a retelling of Theseus's heroic adventure. Instead it is a more somber place. In the end, it is an appendix of letters written to Johnny Truant by his mother from a mental institution which indicate the real character of this house. Disconnected from the narrative, they nevertheless point us to the meaning of that emptiness in the hollow sorrow of the survivor.

The description Danielewski gives of this labyrinth — walls of featureless clay, grey as ash, entirely unlit — bear more than a passing resemblance to descriptions of the netherworld in ancient myths — the house of Ereshkigal, for example, being a dark place whose denizens have only dust and ash for their food. In Danielewski's hands the house becomes a symbol of a vast existential void devouring the relationship of the family who own it, an emptiness of meaning. There is no literal link to the grave, no god of the dead, no ghosts, nothing so simple, but the sense of absence, of loss is palpable, the loss of a marriage, the loss of a mother to madness; it is a house of sorrow.

The house of the dead, Ereshkigal's Kur, the grave, is a place of no return, so the myth of Orpheus tells us. We cannot bring the dead back; Eurydike is lost forever. Surely these tales of death and rebirth — Inanna, Persephone, Dumuzi, Christ — surely these are lies, then? Surely they are refusals of the gut-wrenching reality of death? In a way they may be, but one might also see in them a truer story, a story of sorrow — of the demons of despair, the harrowing of hell, the stripping of the flesh, the loss of affect, the tears and lamentations. And if one sees, in these tales, not the loss and return of a loved one, but rather that of the survivor's soul, then all those resurrections and rebirths may well be offering a more deliverable promise: a restoration at the end of this dark journey of grief . . .

A return from the maze of death we follow our loved ones into when they die.

About the author:

Hal Duncan was raised in small-town Ayrshire and now lives in Glasgow, Scotland. A member of the Glasgow Science Fiction Writers Circle, he published his first short story in 1995. In the years since then he has been working on a diptych called "The Book of All Hours." The first volume, his debut novel, *Vellum*, has been published by Del Rey in the U.S., Macmillan in the U.K.. The concluding volume, *Ink*, will appear in 2007. Duncan has also published stories and essays in a number of anthologies and magazines. For more information, please visit his [blog](#).