

sugar, mirror fairy tale  
Cate Desens

Nduikid Empire. Our tale takes place in the satrapy Middle Ndiepeš<sup>1</sup>, south of broad River Ndeipeš, and east of Ningwa, capital of the empire.



<sup>1</sup> nDIEpesh.

Introducing the Reader to the Peculiarities of Ndikunid,  
as if the Reader were a Child Who Had Never Heard Tales Like this Before,

In Ndikunid, everyone knows that a human being can become an animal, but only once. Why only once? Let's go on.

To become an animal is referred to colloquially as 'feeding the robber,' 'buying a one-way ticket,' or, by the bitterly effected, as 'animal-suicide.'

And there is a righteous bitterness among those left behind: Once you're an animal, there's no reclaiming human-level consciousness. A wild horse that was once a human does not enjoy human company. Nor does a wild horse remember its past humanhood, by the simple proof of a wild horse, confined in the house where it once cooked and made whining, desperately human love, will be unable to find the unlocked back door, which remains open; it maintains no memory.

Ndikunid's natural philosophers overexert themselves dreaming a mind's death before it submits to the breathy ease of horsehood; the woman who would do so, throw themselves on the ground to observe the last glint of light harden in a prisoner's eyes before he becomes a crow, and claimed themselves enlightened; but any who have gone on this journey for themselves have not yet found their way back.

Indeed, the sum total of reports on this mysterious alchemy concludes that little is known, at this time, to us. We can observe that humans exercise a finite amount of control over the animal that they become, but the animal, while not always the form of their choosing, is always a real animal; in other words, here be no dragons; and that transformation seems to be triggered most easily in times of crisis, like a get-out-of-jail-free card; and that group animal-suicides are not unheard of.

And with that, let us begin our tale.



sugar, mirror fairy tale

Once upon a time, there was a woman who lived at the center of a circle called Time.

She is Huša,<sup>2</sup> and she carried a basket from the Forest. As she and Kubi walked home through the gathering dusk, wet leaves found the pavement like little kisses, and a warm breeze twitched her long, dark hair.

Ndandi<sup>3</sup> encouraged Huša's long hair: Ndandi kept hers short. Huša's hair could dull a knife, it was that thick. Ndandi discouraged Forest Excursions: crocodiles (this was not her reason), Kubi's unpredictable but gentle seizures, they could get lost (this was her reason).

So they got lost. Why did Ndandi always have to be right? At least Huša was smart enough to follow the Ndipeš out of the forest, at least it wasn't (yet) night. Huša half-consciously peeked in her basket: and they had mushrooms now, entertainment for the long winter nights.

It was more frustrating than whack-a-mole, living with Ndandi's rightness, rightness that invaded Huša's life at every angle, like Huša was the axle and Ndandi every possible spoke.

Freewheeling, dreaming, sometimes, when Ndandi had her back to her, naked, sleeping, in bed, Huša would kiss Ndandi's back. On every little brown bump and whorl she would put her lips, placing something, or coaxing something, both of those: like a breath.

Ndandi breathed like birds landing on a telephone wire: grace almost imperceptible, degree by degree her back rounding and falling. It seemed impossible such a tiny movement could sustain her, she who sustained so much. But then again, she always felt closest to Ndandi when she was asleep.

And now here she was, hurrying home with her lover's younger brother, before Laverne noticed their absence. It was annoying to be stressed. It made her wish Laverne would just hurry up and die already.

Whoa: she must be thirsty. Cranky. She could go for a beer. Kubi caught a raindrop, and his face made an O and looked up.

It was pale clouds, and between two cloud-banks the sky showed through, like a wound: gauzed with scudding, scabbed darker clouds: dusky purple: real rain soon, the rising breeze. But Kubi so little. Huša kept their pace slow as she could, for Kubi's sake. He would cry if she picked him up. Home not far.

He held her hand: that is to say, she held his pinky enclosed in her fist.

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<sup>2</sup> HOO-sha. Generally, š = sh, č = ch, and so on.

<sup>3</sup> Just as it looks. nDANDi.

They walked east and left the pavement for the gravel goat-trail that cut through the river-valley. At the west end of the valley, sunset dried; but home was to the east.

From the trail, Huša could make out the sound of the Ndipeš river. It's reassuring and slow, like the sound of a little brother sleeping. Calmed her. And moonflowers grew in the river-valley.

If you know about sunflowers, then you know about moonflowers: they are cousins. Both species are tall, with broad faces and flat seeds.

But a sunflower smells of nuts and earth, whereas a moonflower is soft as a cashew, pale as the moon, and smells, impossibly, of dew, and something, too faint for words, too specific to memory.

A dewy-memory: smelling something like last summer, smelling girls who passed Huša by nonchalant, tall girls on their way to the river, and she's shy of them, in their dress-down cut overalls and their high hair: but as they passed her one girl found her eyes and said, So come down with us, ščaka,<sup>4</sup> And that girl was Ndandi.

The moonflower's preferences on time of day should be fairly obvious.

It should be fairly obvious, also, that Huša loved the moonflowers, and Kubi loved to follow Huša. Why?

With the sunset behind them, their shadows are tall as the valley is long. The breeze felt nice. It was annoying to be stressed, with night coming on like a promised dress. She waggled her hips. Kubi stuck out his arms and twirled. Night's first moths flung themselves from his shadow. From the river, sighs like a little boy sleeping.

Ndandi would not be home til who knows? She was notorious for sneaking back into the library after close (she and the librarian had an open-window arrangement.) Definitely later than dinner, not too late for a beer. At midnight, a beery kiss: but for now, a free night. Nobody at home but Laverne, that old crank, and maybe she'd forgive them just this once. Wind: and still no rain. They could afford a little joy. A little sniffing.

The first moth crawled upon the face of the moonflower and gorged itself on sugar. Its proboscis dipped briskly in and out of the seed-husks. The moonflower's face had a diameter larger than Huša's hand, and the moth weaved in and out of seeds, not linearly, more like a swing-dancer changing partners.

Huša watched until she felt heavy, and even as she welcomed that heaviness, kept on watching. Kubi sat down, waiting beside her, probably watching something at his eye-level. A roly-poly or a spider parade (just kidding).

She watched the moth past the normal urge to move, past goosebumps, past sensibility, watched it dance faster and faster as it accumulated sugar. At some point, Kubi took the basket of mushrooms from her and set it on the ground. He didn't say anything, but when did he ever? The moonflower glowed blue.

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<sup>4</sup> ShhCHAKa = little bitch.

And she felt heavier and heavier? She wasn't blinking? The moth dancing erratically, and the river breathing rhythmically: that soft sound was the only thing tethering her to reality.

Her calves and then her thighs and neck twitched, a gently induced seizure.

(Just like Kubi's. Was he still with her?)

And was she being pulled in, into the moonflower?

Just like that Huša became a moth.



At home. She stared at her reflection. Chubby cheeks, small eyes. Complexion Ndiepeš-muddy, and angry zits around her chin, chaos compared to Ndandi's unperturbed cinnamon-brown. What could you expect? City girl. Ndandi probably didn't *let* zits grow on her.

Annoyed. Why couldn't she be free of her desire to see herself?

Huša went back to the kitchen. Cooking for movement therapy. The thought of actually eating made her stomach turn, but cooking now might make her happy later. Ordinarily she would have a record on-something dancey, funky- but not tonight.

Stirred the celery and beet greens and green onions and garlic hunks and of course, they were all burntcrisp on one side, and the rice was mush. She was losing all sense of Time.

What had happened to her, walking through the river-valley?

She turned both gas burners off, ate a chunk of celery, burned her tongue, winced, went to the fridge, grabbed another beer, cracked it with the fridge-door still open against her hip, drank, the fridge beeped, she shut it and went back to the mirror.

Could she get that celery fiber out from between her teeth? No- and more annoying that she could feel it with her tongue but couldn't see it. Was she as chubby as her thunder thighs felt, rippling as they moved? No- yes, she was chubby, but pretty, she reconfirmed, combing her bangs rather urgently, and rechecking her profile- or was she?

Then she realized what she was doing- the same thing, again. It was like babysitting a toddler- but Kubi had more going on in his head than she did, she thought with despair.

I don't want to be a human. I really don't. She remembered what it was like to be a moth. Or rather, she remembered the blankness of not having to remember anything.

Many winters ago, one of her uncles messed around on the Ndiepeš and fell through the ice. The current took him: when his body was recovered a mile downstream, his heart had stopped, his lips were blue. He was declared legally dead. Huša's mom was guilt-tripped into paying for a high-end coffin. The undertakers placed him in his coffin and his coffin in his grave. The first clod hit the coffin. Then, at the last possible second, her uncle woke up.

Now, he carried a 'Do Not Resuscitate' Card. And what had he told Huša about his unbelievable experience? What had death been like?

He stabbed his venison hunk and looked at it meanly, I envy this meat, he said, Then he looked at her, meanly, then he ate. (That's about as excited as he ever got.)

What on Earth had pulled her back? Oh yeah, Kubi. Thoughts of him, his squinty eyes, his vulnerable littleness. Not hers to take care of, though. He was Ndandi's brother. Fuck!

Her ugly face (and it really was.) Remember those bluefeather moth antennae? Right out of her forehead, above the eyes? She smashed the mirror. With her fist. Ofuck! The pain was immediate, blinding as a light going out.

Huša balled up her shirt and bit it savagely to keep from crying out. She sank to the floor.

But there was the creak of Laverne's door down the hall. A mirror-shattering is hard to sleep through. Ofuck!

What, did you smell me cooking? Huša called weakly trying to set the tone, then bit down on her shirt again, nursing her fist close to her chest, not looking at the blood on her knuckles.

The mirror was rainbow-webbed but remained up on the wall.

Down the hall Laverne crept and shut her door behind her so as not to wake Kubi up, You somehow manage to ruin even stir fry, she said, coming down the hall with her white hair frescoed in gravity-defying lumps, looking for all the world like a clove of garlic nesting on her head. She is brisk like any mother (although credit to her: she is merely Huša's aunt).

Oh my baby what have you done, Seven year's bad luck, she tut-tutted, I want to be rid of all desires, Huša said weakly, I mean mirrors, Oh you should have said so, said Laverne, that's simple as lemon meringue pie. Now show me your hand.



It was cold in the kitchen. The breeze threatened rain and disturbed the flowers gathered in a vase on the sill. Simple flowers- autumn joy, black-eyed susans, daisies- all gone crispy dead, and looking skeletal in the sodium-orange kitchen light.

And the kitchen was a mess, with the pans still oily on the stove, a colander in the sink, it had a hectic, abandoned air, and indeed Huša had abandoned something. Laverne sat her down, wrapped her hand in a kitchen towel, and bustled off to get supplies. Then she was back, and she had to open her mouth. You're crazy now, she said, simply as you might say, Goodmorning.

Huša looked at the flowers, really looked at them. Dead things: she lived. With every pulse of her heart, her hand squeezed and stung. She couldn't focus. She stared at the flowers as the rain began to make merry on the roof.

Laverne sat down across from her with a bottle of isopropyl alcohol, warily like these were parent-teacher conferences or something. But who's the parent? Laverne didn't treat her like a child.

Laverne treated her like a sister- holding grudges long past their expiration date. But Huša is her niece, not her sister, and so why did Huša's fuckups bother the old crank so much?

She didn't mean to start talking, but,

I think, it can't be, but, I think I turned into a moth, Hmmmmmm,

(and upon this point on the circle of Time, the people of Nduikid were as of yet unfamiliar with animal-transformations.)

Like in the old Northern legends, Laverne supplied helpfully, ever the right one, her gaze on the open window, Polar bear men, guides and such, Yes, but I'm back, and wrung out, That's why transformations are meant to be one way only, Laverne said, and she took Huša hand and unwrapped the towel and poured isopropyl alcohol on it, and Huša actually *screamed*.

Animal-gone-and-come-back? You'self too much for you'self. Now *shush*, or Kubi'll wake up.

He's up, I'm sure. I feel like boiled opelt,<sup>5</sup> Huša said. Please tell me we have morphine-tablets? Laverne dabbed at Huša's hand with a sterile cloth, then took another cloth and wrapped it around the palm, tied between the thumb and index. Cloth soon soaked in red. The pain made her sweat.

I'm so stupid.

Laverne kept at her work. Even after the cloth had soaked through. Yes. She nodded.

Please, Laverne. Morphine?

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<sup>5</sup> cow pie.

Like a good nurse, Laverne ignored her. You have a glass shard in your knuckle, and I think you snipped a tendon in your hand. You'll be lucky if you ever move your index or middle fingers again, but that's the least of your worries. What brought you back?

Kubi.

Really?

Huša groaned and put her head down on the table. Laverne went to the sink and washed her hands. Then she came back and stroked Huša's back. It was dim, but the breeze was not quiet. The kitchen still smelled of cooked things, and now layered with rain and sweat and blood and alcohol, like the smell of sex but in reverse.

You're always surprising me, Ša. First you fall in love with a girl from Ningwa.

Don't remind me, Huša said with her head still down.

Country girl like you. With a sophisticated girl like Ndandi. I just never thought you'd be able to pull a girl like that!

Shut up, Huša said and she finally lifted her head and looked up at Laverne's chalky face. She'd always been so pale for someone from Ndiepeš: but now she looked translucent as sautéed onion.

Let me look at that hand again.

No, Auntie. Tell me what's going on. How do you know about- the animals?

Like a sister, Laverne ignored her. I'm sure she's grateful, Ndandi. But you should know better, than to beg your way in. Your mom would be ashamed.

Ashamed? Huša snatched herself away from Laverne. You *Splugite*,<sup>6</sup> Huša hissed.

Laverne's bedroom door creaked open. They both heard it.

Laverne smiled: but it was more like a creak in the ice, for all the good it did her face. He's handicapped, babygirl. He'll never speak. And you- you always were so desperate to be helpful, weren't you? Such a needy girl. But you're *not his mom*.

Huša stood up. It was time to go. And you're not my mom, she barely said.

May she move Mbani,<sup>7</sup> Laverne returned her whisper, all her anger gone vacant.

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<sup>6</sup> Splugite = witch. Also a derogatory term for someone from Splug.

<sup>7</sup> May she move Mbani = may her legacy continue, may she rest in peace.



Why had she never thought of Lavie as half of a whole? They were identical twins, after all.

Without turning around, she backs out of the kitchen, her eyes still on Laverne. The tall brittle aged Laverne. That's what her mom would have looked like, had she lived. She's almost made it. Back to her room. When.

It's harder than it looks, Laverne whispered.

Laverne's voice deepened, doubled and tripled. Her voice echoed with many voices: to do it right.

Her eyes rolled back in her head, leaving only blank balls, and her pale flesh lumped and crawled. She was a tower of maggots.

I think it requires- some kind of peace.

Laverne looked right at her. Her lips curled: they were maggots, an especially fat one for the lower lip. I couldn't pull it off, either.

A small hand on her hand. It was Kubi.



They sat on Huša's bed. Huša was staying awake by smoking and blowing it out the window, the one that had no screen. And the rain came down, and Ndandi was playing with that old guitar that nobody knew where it had come from, because when she had finally come home Huša was passed out,

And there was blood all over the sheets, it looked like a fucking miscarriage,

And Kubi was just sitting there! Happy as a clam!

Happy you're home, Huša said, rubbing her eyes.

Waking up in the middle of the night, sticky with blood, was unreal. Ndandi had hustled her off to a hot shower and gone on a cleaning rampage, sheets, towels, pillowcases, shirt and socks for good measure, all in the wash. And she scrubbed Kubi in the sink (brutally cold water, there in the sink.) So here they were.

On the bed. Huša turned down Ndandi's offer of mushrooms.

I don't think I'll be able to sleep, Ndandi said, scooting closer, Adrenaline shocked my veins. I'm nothing but fiber optic cables.

That's fine. Huša pulled in smoke, closed her eyes. Not many people enjoy tobacco as much as she did.

We can tell stories. It's only right: it's raining. Do you want to know where I found your aunt Lavie?

No.

She was passed out in the kitchen.

She look normal?

You mean except for the blood?

Yeah.

Fucking blood everywhere? Fucking give me a heads up, next time.

I'm sorry.

Yeah. I haven't forgiven you, but she's fine. You gonna tell me what happened?

Can't. Yet.

Fine. Huša passed her the spliff, Ndandi took it. This is mellow, Yeah I rolled it, smells like swampgrass.<sup>8</sup> Ndandi put her legs over Huša's legs. She smelled like buttery green tea, and the smell of warm rain clung to her t-shirt.

So have I told you about the first time I hooked up with a girl?

Huša looked pointedly at Kubi. Kubi stuck his tongue out and kept on chipping a hole in their bedroom wall with his fingernails.

It's good for kids to hear about love.

Ok. Tell me.

Ok. Well after years of kissing boys, this was wonderful.

Huša took a drag. Let me guess, coffeeshop meet-cute.

Too easy! No, I'd known her for years. We hooked up when I was nineteen, but I'd known her since grade school. In fact, I'm pretty bad at picking up girls in public places. You know this. Just cause I'm from Ningwa doesn't mean I'm worldly. Quite a lot of city people spend their adult imaginations in their rooms, and I'm no different.

You could just say people, not city people.

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<sup>8</sup> it's just weed

Yeah.

Ok, ok, on with the story.

Laverne had crept in. She wore a cotton nightdress like something out of *Peter Pan*. She took a seat on the floor next to Kubi, criss-cross applesauce. Ndandi looked at her, and looked at Huša for confirmation. Huša tensed, remembering her maggot lips, then nodded: like any other dream, the only way out was to just go with it.

Now they were four.

Anyway, so her name is Anja, we started going out after soccer games together, on Saturday nights. Neither of us liked to drink, at the time, so that pretty much ruled out parties, but it's just miserable to go straight home after a sporting event, right? I mean, the crowd just gives you something, and you need to spend it up somewhere.

And Anja just happened to be sitting next to me at one of those games, in early fall, yknow, the kind of weather love is made for, not to mention she's a redhead. And her friends left the game early. And I just turned to her, and I think what I asked her specifically was, "Do you want to go on an adventure." Ndandi took a drag and giggled. God, what a *loser* I was! That's what makes it so hot.

So we walked around like that for the next six weekends. And each weekend the sexual tension would ramp up. I mean, you remember being nineteen.

Kubi nodded. (He was four.)

I think Anja knew the whole time I wanted to kiss her, and it just made her crazy. We would find all these excuses to touch each other, like, let me paint something on your arm. Let me fix your hair. Let me light your cigarette for you. One night, we found a hawk feather.

Huša's eyes found a ugly, gray drenched feather sitting in a jar on Ndandi's desk. It'd always been there.

No.

Ndandi nodded dramatically Being the center of attention suited her. Yes.

It just started with her tickling me on the neck with that feather. Before I knew it, she was tickling my belly, and she was taking my shirt off and pinching my nipples through my bra. And I put my fingers in her mouth.

The only nearby building was a warehouse, down by the Ndiepeš. You ever been down to those warehouses?

No.

Well, they're creepy, and they stink! It goddamn reeks of salmon guts. It ain't sexy, that's for shore. But we didn't care. You can sneak in no problem, and that's what we needed. She laid me down in a pile of something soft- she had such strong, feminine arms- and we found out later that it was sawdust.

And we proceeded to make sweaty, stinky, sawdusty love. You wanna know the worst part?

Huša passed the stubby end of the spliff to Laverne.

It wasn't that I got sawdust all up in my cooch, or that I never found that bra. It was just my color too, royal blue with purple straps. No, the worst part is that after that, after we had laid together in a pile of sawdust, and helped each other get dressed in complete, intimate silence, was that once the tension had been released, there was nothing between us.

Whenever we spoke after that, it was bland, and it was clear we were never really friends. Just attracted to each other's bodies. Even if I wanted to want her, I couldn't.

Now I want other women. Ndandi rubbed her ass on Huša. Ah, well. Life is about accumulating desires.

Yeah. Now, the desire to be not-human is within me.

So serious! You're not going anywhere, are you, Huša?

No. I got stressed, but I'm staying with you two.

Laverne blew a huge puff of smoke into the room, nowhere near the window. What about me?

Huša had been waiting for Laverne to speak. This had to end somehow, and what else was left for Lavie?

I've already halfway gone, and no one's waiting on me.

Huša didn't contradict her. It was true.

We made peace. Now keep going. And try picking just one animal this time.

Sure. Why not a moth?

Suits you.

And Laverne flew out the window. That was the end of Huša's time at the center of the circle. Having accepted desire, she moved on, to where the other people lived.



For those of you too scared to try, be grateful you will become worms in death.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY (& 2 MOVIES)

*Blindness*, José Saramago, for inspiring my new favorite way of doing dialogue, ie: Xxxxxx, Yyyyyy, Zzzzz...

*The Fifth Season*, N. K. Jemisin, for showing how to incorporate a conlang, and also for worldbuilding  
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*The Obelisk Gate*, N. K. Jemisin, for asking rhetorical questions as a narrative technique, and exclamations, and refusals, and doubt, ie, for making stream-of-consciousness cool

*Mind of My Mind*, Octavia Butler, for a good fight-per-chapter ratio

*Frankenstein*, Mary Shelly, for monster research

*The Killing Fields* (movie), for monster research

*Garlic is As Good as Ten Mothers* (documentary) for character and culinary inspiration

*Women Who Run With Wolves*, Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Ph.D, for pointing out what fairy tales are for

*First Person Singular*, Haruki Murakami, for pointing out how little needs to happen in a good story

*Norwegian Wood*, Haruki Murakami, for making me cry, and pointing out that's what stories are for

*Language in Mind*, Julie Sedivy, for conlang research and conceptual pacts

*Learning Disability: Dissenting Essays*, I don't know the author because I already returned this to the library, but this was important for writing about kids with Down Syndrome

*The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More*, Roald Dahl, for justifying why I like whimsy

*Stories of Your Life and Others*, Ted Chiang, for coming of age with me

*In Dubious Battle*, John Steinbeck, for pointing out the excitement of blood

*The Octopus Museum*, Brenda Shaughnessy, for animal transudation porn

*Me Moth*, Amber McBride, for writing poetry as prose as sex scenes. sorry LOVE scenes

*catalogue of unabashed gratitude*, ross gay, for emotional regulation

