

# Feast of Souls

by Jane Yolen

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An A|NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

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The old man is lying under a white cloak with a large red cross emblazoned. Kneeling by his bed is a younger version of himself, a dark-haired, hawk-nosed man, eyes carmined with weeping. The bed is large and hung with heavy wine-colored curtains, but they are pulled back to let in air and light. The old man needs all the air and light he can get. He no longer eats anything but a little mushroom crumbled in a bowl, sprinkled with fresh-baked bread. And white wine. Red is too strong, he has told them. It fires the blood.

There are always watchers in the bedroom now, the vigils set by those who love him best, those who expect the most from him. His son, this strong-beaked survivor, has organized the relays. John d'Erley and Thomas Basset are there most often, by their own requests. But it is the son, the Younger as he is called by his mother and those of parallel quality, for he bears his father's name, who takes the most perilous watch. Wrapped in his silken gown, the squirrel collar soon to be replaced by his father's sable, he sits late at night by the bed. His is the midnight watch, those times when the Devil is most likely to prowl and Death to visit.

Because we do not wish to be confused with those small demons that men are prone to number and to shun, we never visit the dying at night. We come to the bedsides at less vulnerable times. We *wish* to be seen. We *wish* to be known. To be counted, catalogued, wondered at. That is our charge, after all. We are the harbingers. We are the messengers. We sow a people's God that we may reap the harvest of their souls. How else to feed on this alien earth?

That is why the Monday before Ascension, during the day, we show ourselves to Earl Marshal as he lies dying. There is no satiety in feasting on small souls. We look for the men of nexus, the turning points of history, the great foci. And these we know from the histories. Not the ones writ centuries after, but the *chansons* and ballads, the journals and logs set down by the ones who loved them best and count their loss the greatest.

We knew from the histories that the earl's dying would be a long, slow progress. What began at Candlemas would last a full two months and more, taking him to Marlborough Castle, to Westminster, thence riding down his pain to London Tower where he would wait, besieged behind the thick walls, as if waiting for some final charge by Death's minions. But then he retreated once again, this time by slow water to his manor in Caversham. Death, our brother, followed.

But we went before. In this eternity of feasting, we always go before. Death reads the histories, even as do we. He knows the times and the places, though he cannot come before time. He must hope to harvest what we have not yet happened upon. There are two of us and only one of him but he is a glutton. We are tasters; he takes all.

In 1219, in Earl Marshal's dark bedroom, we wear white so he may have no trouble discerning us in the gloom.

His son is begging him to eat. "We are certain," he says to his father in a voice he would never have used if the old man were not now permanently abed, "it will do you good." Just as reported in the histories.

The arrival of eternity has softened the earl. A man who captured some five hundred knights in his

lifetime of tournaments, who sired five sons and five daughters upon a wealthy, willing wife, he is not used to listening to the importunings of his children, especially not to one called all his life The Younger. Still the earl has been made kind in this last crisis, in case he has to justify these last words to his god.

“Then for that,” he answers in a voice made husky by fever, “I shall eat as much as I can.” The histories are always word-perfect in these pasts. Perhaps it is that memory is greater when letters are not learned. Perhaps we reconstruct history out of story by traveling back in time. Perhaps our hunger for the feast of souls lets us listen with lenient ears. There are many *perhapses* that can be fashioned over centuries of feasting.

The Younger leaves to get the food, relieved, yet fearful that food really *will* sustain his father in his long dying. The squirrel collar tickles his neck, reminding him that it is not yet sable. The servants do not lower their eyes as quickly to him as they will when he is master.

Two men, the estimable John d’Erley, who has given up mansions and marriage to remain Marshal’s squire, bound to him by the kind of love that men in this time enjoy but do not name, and Thomas Basset, that consummate cipher, raise the earl up so that he may sit while eating.

Basset leaves the room to collect the food from The Younger’s own hands. There is still fear of poisoning; someone might want to hasten the Flower of Chivalry to his death. He must not be rushed before time.

D’Erley slips his hand behind the earl’s back. The touch comforts them both, though neither will admit it. Especially d’Erley, who has more to lose by such an admission, having neither wife nor child nor cleric’s collar to save him from calumnies.

I show myself to the earl, as does my companion. The white of our robes gleams in the dim lumens. He cannot count our limbs nor make out the contours of our faces. It would not do to let him really see our eyes. Hence the white robes.

Earl Marshal may be startled, but he is too old a hand at the uncanny and the unusual to do more than blanch. Even as a child he was able to disguise his fears, joking with King Stephen’s hangmen when they threatened him. Or perhaps he is now too weak to respond. He waits until the cloth is laid and the soup bowl with the mushrooms and bread set before him. He waits until the cipher Basset leaves the room again, for only d’Erley will he allow to feed him, to see him in his ultimate weakness. It is d’Erley, alone, who wipes his bowels and changes the towels kept between his legs to stanch the flow which he can no longer control.

Basset leaves and the earl turns his head slightly, speaking in a whisper to d’Erley, who must put his head down next to the old man’s mouth in order to hear. The earl does this for a reason, knowing how much d’Erley is comforted and discomforted by the closeness of their connection. However, he does not realize that his breath stinks, a compote of age and decay. If he did, it would discomfort *him*, for he was ever a meticulous man.

But d’Erley, blinkered, can see nothing but the old man’s covers, the red cross, the plate.

“Do you see what I see?” Marshal asks. Since d’Erley does not at first understand him, the earl is forced to repeat it twice more, weakening with each word.

“My Lord, I do not know what that might be,” d’Erley says, sure it is Death the earl sees, has seen these past two months. But he is early in his assessment by days. My brother is busy elsewhere, reaping still in the sands around Jerusalem and in the deltas of Africa, in London’s awful slums.

“By my soul,” the earl says, the confession strong in his mouth, the very word exciting us to a fresh

brilliance, "I see two men in white, one is beside me on the right, the other on the left. Nowhere have I seen men so fine."

Having been properly observed, we allow ourselves to fade away. Not men, of course. There are but three of us in all the universe, and though I say "brother" it is but a convenience, a nod to the sexing of language in this world. We wear no gender. We do not reproduce. We are three and we are one, together, forever.

But the earl, though he has seen us, he sees us as he would have us, not as we are. Besides, in his old age he has developed problems with his vision, seeing rather less well than did his father, who lost an eye at the convent of Wherewhell when the melting lead of a fired roof dripped directly upon his face. We were neither to the earl's left nor his right, but rather hovering over his great bed.

But he had seen what he was meant to see, what the history says he saw. Witnessing, he passes it on, impressing it upon d'Erley whose memory will serve as the maker of the *chanson*. Thus is the loop of history preserved.

D'Erley answers, "My Lord, thus there come to you a company that will lead you in the true way," neglecting to ask for more details from the man he worships, loves, fears. It is just as well. Details would only serve to confuse. Only the angels of Revelations have eyes all around and within, in front and behind. D'Erley will task himself with this neglect for years to come, and that, too, will go into his history.

So we pass from the scene, my brother and I, through the thick stone walls of Caversham, over the lead roof, into the darkening night sky where a single moon lends its feeble light. We give little thought to our other brother who will pass this way a few days hence only to discover how meager are our leavings. They will be rinsed well with rose water, stiffening in a chamber already stripped of its possessions by the earl himself, giving away his gowns and gold for the good of a soul which he no longer owns. Yet he has us to thank for so quiet and peaceful an end. It is only the ones we cannot find loving history for who die in agony, like Marshal's first master, Henry Plantagenet, devoured by the disease that first seized him by the heel. He was forced by our brother to drag himself around his rooms like some poor, miserable beast, moaning until the end when the clotted blood fell from his mouth and nose and he lay quite alone.

We never dwell on our failures or our brother's successes. In truth we do not understand them. None of us recalls the beginning, only this endless circuit, this cosmic encircling, this treadmill of souls. Each year we discover another song, another story brought down through the ages that smells of truth, and ride its memory back through the years, though we have been confused more than once. Humans are consummate actors in the camera's eye. Sometimes it is a true memory and then we do feast. More often there is a false trail, and then there is famine.

Perhaps some day we will even claim Henry Plantagenet's soul, finding a history left by Eleanor, who once loved him, though certainly his sons did not. Then we could bring his dying a little peace. He might even rest his last days in a bed, brought mushrooms and wine by a beloved counselor, and we would shine on him with our white robes. Or, if he preferred, halos and harps; we could provide those.

But that is another *perhaps* and foolish of me to maunder so. Besides, we are planning our next besiegement, for a scholar has recently discovered an account of the life and death of Arthur's only son, written by the one who loved him, his devouring mother, the Fey. There are only twenty-seven parchment leaves, written in a strange Gaelic, and two leaves are missing. But each leaf contains two columns of forty lines. If it is true, it promises to be quite a feast. And in our turn, we promise to give him a quiet, soulless ending.

Selah.

## Notes and proofing history

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This story has not been reprinted to date.

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