

Karen Blixen on Natural Divination

Introduction by Patrick Curry

Karen Blixen was a distinguished Danish writer, born 17 April 1885 and died 7 September 1962. She is best-known for her elegantly heart-breaking short stories, including 'Babette's Feast', and *Out of Africa*, her account of living in Kenya and running a coffee-farm in the Ngong Hills. (Both were made into films: the first superbly, the second absurdly.) The extract reproduced below is surely one of the most powerful modern accounts – including her own reflections – of natural divination. It describes an incident in mid-May 1931, one week after the love of her life, Denys Finch Hatton, died when his light aircraft crashed. Blixen's coffee-farm was already facing insolvency, and by August, doubly devastated, she was on her way back to Denmark. She never returned to Africa.

A week after Denys's death one morning a strange thing happened to me.

I lay in bed and thought of the events of the last months, I tried to understand what it really was that had happened. It seemed to me that I must have, in some way, got out of the normal course of human existence, into a maelstrom where I ought never to have been. Wherever I walked, the ground fell away under me, and the stars fell from the sky. I thought of the poem about Ragnarok, in which this fall of the stars is described, and of the verses about the dwarfs who sigh deeply in their caves in the mountains, and die from fear. All this could not be, I thought, just a coincidence of circumstances, what people call a run of bad luck, but there must be some central principle within it. If I could find it, it would save me: If I looked in the right place, I reflected, the coherence of things might become clear to me. I must, I thought, get up and look for a sign.



Karen Blixen in the early 1920s

Many people think it an unreasonable thing, to be looking for a sign. This is because of the fact that it takes a particular state of mind to be able to do so, and not many people have ever found themselves in such a state. If in this mood, you ask for a sign, the answer cannot fail you; it follows as the natural consequence of the demand. In that same way an inspired card-player collects thirteen chance cards on the table, and takes up what is called a hand of cards — a unity. Where others see no call at all, he sees a grand slam staring him in the face. Is there a grand slam in the cards? Yes, to the right player.

I came out of the house looking for a sign, and wandered at haphazard towards the boys' huts. They had just let out their chickens, which were running here and there amongst the houses. I stood for a little while and looked at them.

Fathima's big white cock came strutting up before me. Suddenly he stopped, laid his head first on one side, and then on the other, and raised his comb. From the other side of the path, out of the grass, came a little grey Chameleon that was, like the cock himself, out on his morning reconnoitring. The cock walked straight upon it, — for the chickens eat these things, — and gave out a few clucks of satisfaction. The Chameleon stopped up dead at the sight of the cock. He was frightened, but he was at the same time very brave, he planted his feet in the ground, opened his mouth as wide as he possibly could, and to scare his enemy, in a flash he shot out his club-shaped tongue at the cock. The cock stood for a second as if taken aback, then swiftly and determinately he struck down his beak like a hammer and plucked out the Chameleon's tongue.

The whole meeting between the two had taken ten seconds. Now I chased off Fathima's cock, took up a big stone and killed the Chameleon, for he could not live without his tongue; the Chameleons catch the insects that they feed on with their tongue.

I was so frightened by what I had seen, — for it had been a gruesome and formidable thing in a miniature format, — that I went away and sat down on the stone seat by the house. I sat there for a long time, and Farah brought me out my tea, and put it on the table. I looked down on the stones and dared not look up, such a dangerous place did the world seem to me.

Very slowly only, in the course of the next few days, it came upon me that I had had the most spiritual answer possible to my call. I had even been in a strange manner honoured and distinguished. The powers to which I had cried had stood on my dignity more than I had done myself, and what other answer could they then give? This was clearly not the hour for coddling, and they had chosen to connive at my invocation of it. Great powers had laughed to me, with an echo from the hills to follow the laughter, they had said among the trumpets, among the cocks and Chameleons, Ha ha!

I was also pleased that I had been out this morning in time to save the Chameleon from a slow, painful death.

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