As I write, buds swell on Virginia’s dogwoods and redbuds. Azaleas leaf out prior to staging a color riot. The gravity-defying sap of new life rises in the seasonal cycle that the human family recognizes as the end of winter and the start of the festival days of summer.

Amidst this nascent beauty I am relishing another age-old rhythmic ritual, that of story. A few days ago I sat on the floor surrounded by restive five-year-olds. We had just spent an hour throwing a ball back and forth, coloring, and discussing angry feelings. Probably because these activities pre-empted the story I usually read to the group, several of them formed a human chain around me and demanded “Tell us a story!…yeah, a scary story!” I obliged, spinning a spontaneous yarn about George who lived in a big, old house and heard a ghost in the attic. I illuminated the ghostly presence with some sustained, high-pitched “ooh” vowels, and little Linda Hexter, clearly a story connoisseur, said grudgingly, “Hmmm…pretty scary.” Her critical praise echoed the ancient human response to the power of words, human experience parsed into all the glorious parts of speech. I am an inveterate reader, and though years older than little Linda Hexter, story continues to nourish my spirit. Over the last few weeks I have been enjoying a delicious story-telling experience, directing a staged reading of a cycle of stories for the Virginia Festival of the Book. These “prophetic tales” (so-named by their “author” Jean Maria Arrigo, Ph.D.) relate the culture and history of the Tribe of Blood River. In her youth Jean Maria had the misfortune to be pressed into service as a preliminary contact with remote South American tribes to facilitate dubious experimentation which used tribe members as subjects. As a result, Jean Maria “received,” from a shaman or otherwise, hundreds of stories which profile several extinct tribes. No lightweight, and certainly no wacko, Jean Maria is a social psychologist and the recipient of a Rockefeller Foundation grant. She is currently a fellow of the Institute on Violence and Culture of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, which seeks “to apply the humanities anthropology, literature, history, and religious studies to modern problems.” The Institute publishes a journal called Sacred Bearings, which “explores the spiritual lives of survivors of violence, giving words to this often unspoken dimension of survivor recovery.” (www.virginia.edu/vfh/ctr.)

Jean Maria and I have been collaborating on a six-hour, marathon telling of 17 of the 48 Tales of Blood River. I have pulled together a cast of 30, including musicians, professional actors, children, retirees, faculty and students. From 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. on March 21 we will present a feast of words and catered snacks to audience members who will come and go from the basic theatre lab space in the basement of the Drama Building. The Institute on Violence and Culture will publish a volume of the complete Blood River Epic, including a director’s guide, which I will prepare. Should any readers be interested in these prophetic tales, contact Jean Maria at <jmarrigo@pacbell.net>.

Grappling with the deeply rooted words of this epic whets my appetite for our upcoming conference in Chicago, entitled “The Lost Secrets of Speaking Shakespeare,” a tantalizing and prophetic title in itself, courtesy of Jan Gist. Lost secrets, prophetic tales, epics, scary stories, are all the stuff of words, of story, of Shakespeare, of VASTA. It is time, now and always, for the TELLING!

Wishing you the renewal of spring,

Kate Burke, VASTA President

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