



# Underground *PART I*

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## Unearthing Alice

You remember *Alice's Adventures Underground*, happily renamed *Alice in Wonderland*? That dear little child stumbles down a rabbit hole that leads to a well shaft, that leads, well, some might say to madness. It all starts with that memorably ordinary line: "Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister..." So begins her journey, from which she emerges later a far wiser but no less playful child.

The earth, seat of Vulcan and his fiery forge, offers up its riches to those who seek or those who stumble, like Alice, onto its treasure. In fairytales, the way in is often secretive and occult — or meant only for the chosen. A trap door opens upon a spiral staircase leading to an enchanted realm in Perault's fairytale, "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," for example, and no one knows of their secret rendezvous with the twelve handsome princes until a lowly shepherd succeeds, by virtue of an invisible cloak and a bit of pluck, to follow them. In Scheherazade's story of "Aladdin" the earth cracks open to reveal a stone door leading to a stair. In *Alice*,

things are less magical than madcap, but that only speaks to the irrational forces at work underground.

In many fairy stories the subterranean realm is described as a forest with trees whose gold and silver branches hang heavy with jewels; in others, as rank murky waters clotted with dead men and moss-slick stones. In classical mythology the river Styx, across which Charon ferries the newly dead to the turgid halls of Hades, flows through the land of no return where Persephone was condemned to spend half of every year.

In the Sumerian myth of Innana, the goddess of heaven is struck lifeless by her sister and hung like dead meat on a hook in the Underworld for three days. Likewise Aladdin remains underground for exactly that span of time, suffering starvation, fear, and loss until he accidentally raises the spirit of the ring he wears. In myths, stories, and religious rites, the hero's trial typically lasts three days, but this might well seem like three months or three years for those who take such a journey. (Three is a symbolic and magical number. Tibetan monks, for example, ritually stay in seclusion for three years, three

months, three weeks, and three days. And, of course, it was three days before Christ arose from the dead.)

Journeying underground is an eternal theme — one found in many a hero's story. It is a metaphor for all our psychic torments, that dark night from which, ego shattered, the soul emerges stripped of worldly goods, newborn. Mortal, god, mystic, or fairytale adventurer (so often the third n'er-do-well son or rebellious daughter of a king) passes through this dangerous landscape and surrenders, however briefly, to its dark forces. In Tarot, the hangman's card best illustrates this time out of life, this suspension — the poor fellow hangs upside down from a tree branch.

What is this time out of time, this limbo, but another way of viewing creative ferment? Thus, Ann Sexton called the practice of poetry the black art. Thus, Charles Dodgson wrote *Alice* while under the influence of severe migraines. Thus, the fairly universal association of madness and suicide with artists; and thus, on the flipside, the birth of the creative imagination and Keats's sublime awareness, *Beauty is truth, truth beauty...*

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