




MUSING ON THE COUNCIL PICKUP

Hekate's dedication to household garbage

Jacinta Frawley

“WELL YOU said you were going to clean up and you really did,” my neighbour says. “Yes I really did, didn’t I”, I say, nodding proudly. I am standing in the middle of the street admiring a pile of crumpled boxes, a set of shelves, an old bed, past Christmas decorations, a particularly hated selection of curtains from various past houses (all bought second hand), a broken vacuum cleaner and a working organ (gift of a different neighbour from a previous council pickup). “I like your couch,” I say to my neighbour whose head and feet I can see peeking out over each end of the cream couch, which is placed on the street verge.



The back of the couch is toward the street hiding most of her from view and she lies reclining as we discuss the council pickup. She is amazed that there is always so much to be collected every six months, where does it all come from? I wonder where it was before it appeared overnight on the street? Are there piles of this stuff in back gardens everywhere?

After all, items selected for the council pickup need thought. These objects were clearly not in use yesterday. This is no impulse throwing away. The old packing boxes, rusted watering cans, no-longer-loved toys and broken sporting equipment up and down the street have clearly been in disuse for some time. These are the items that were not deemed good enough for

a charity shop, or a garage sale. No friend or family could be found who would take them. Nothing here could be packed off to a natural disaster victim or aid agency. Nothing here shouts “keep me for that school project, dress up day, fancy dress party, I can be turned into street art!”

I wonder about the now empty garages and corners of the shed, the under-houses and attic spaces that held these items in the time and space between when they were useful and when they became refuse on the street. What must it be to rest in a corner, in transition from the useful, to ‘not sure about that’, to being rubbish? Are these corner spaces now empty or are they filling up already? My neighbour and I wander up and down the street mentally picking over the piles in front of each house. To touch anything seems to go too far and imply a sense of desire or an assertion of potential ownership that somehow seems indecent in our own street. I feel that if I were to touch something it would claim me and I would be obliged to take it home. Then we arrive at another neighbour who is putting out piles of plants. She knows that the council won’t take green waste and instead is hopeful that the council pick up, which always draws people onto the street, will encourage some passer-by to take her excess plants. A talented gardener, she has so much success that she doesn’t know what else to do with the plants and so she chooses to set them free to find their own new homes.

This makes me think about the power and life in objects. Manna, “God’s sweet word”, has been withdrawn from these street objects. No longer

useful for their original purpose they have also not yet been transformed into a new use. They have not yet found their new life as recycling, landfill, compost or fuel for power stations. If, as Jung would tell us, there is story and god in every human activity, what is the story god in the refuse sorted, placed and displayed with great care in front of our houses. Who is the story god in something that until yesterday we were hiding, and are now deliberately putting on display? Who is the god in the council pickup?

The ancient Greeks dedicated their household garbage to Hekate, “the distant one”. An underworld goddess, the guardian of those caught in liminal spaces--witches, vampires, ghosts, the homeless and derelicts--Hekate also guards and guides the liminal spaces of our domestic lives as the guardian of household doorways and presides over transitions of childbirth and death.

Hekate’s rites were repeated each month on the evening of the first sighted new moon. Houses were thoroughly cleaned and purified and the garbage deposited at the crossroads at which an image of the Triple Hekate was installed. The garbage particularly included personal refuse such as hair and nail clippings. Having made this sacrifice, one was to walk away without looking back. The dedication of bodily cast offs such as nail clippings and hair is an act of sacrifice of self. Discarded parts of bodies are necessary to make spells and directly dedicating these important ingredients to the Queen of Witches circumvented Hekate’s minions gaining power through magic, for if they were to take the dedicated garbage they



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would be stealing directly from Hekate herself and draw her wrath—a type of magical protection racket. There is a residue to this superstition in the complex attitudes to people who search through the council pickup before the council removes it. Some residents seem to view this as akin to stealing—“it was put out for the council it is meant for the council”, while others feel grateful that some use is to be made of their discards. The first view is akin to fear of black magic where something is taken away from the victim for a potentially malevolent purpose and the second, also a magical view, hopes for transformation of material into something new, from garbage to something useful.

I also wonder where else Hekate lurks. Perhaps in the rubbish bin of discarded emails in computers, or in delete buttons that don’t really delete but rather move items from the visible part of our computer to hidden folders from where those modern magicians, IT specialists, can still retrieve items years later. Hekate is the ghost in the unconscious of the computer. I think of our

concern with identity theft, how we are always being warned that our casualness about personal details (modern nail clippings) can cause our identities to be stolen and used against us without our knowledge. As if we were possessed or bewitched. I think of all those scrap bins under all those kitchen sinks—the scraps not yet moved to the compost or rubbish bin yet no longer potential food for the householders, but certainly potential nourishment for Hekate’s animal devotees mice and cockroaches. I think of the piles of old letters, birthday cards, memories of times past, tossed into boxes, but no, though these are held in a liminal space Hekate seldom claims these as her own. Residues of memory she usually leaves for our descendents to sort after we are gone. Nor does she expect to receive everything that is discarded into a corner. The soccer boots and skin pads abandoned in the hallway will come back to life next week. The little piles of pens, hair clips, coins, and half scribbled notes gathered together on the kitchen bench will be scattered again through the house and used many times before Hekate claims them. No, Hekate is better found in another imaginal realm.

Just as she takes the garbage of the household and the body Hekate also takes the “garbage of the soul” for she is also the goddess of divination and dreams. There is a view that dreams are “day residues” regurgitated by the brain with the goal of ordering and tidying our thoughts, the better to work and love the next day. But there is no



punishment nor consequence nor judgement of mess in Hekate. She is not concerned with Saturn's need for order, nor the compulsion of *puer* Hermes to recycle and reconnect, nor Apollo's search for meaning. It is not her goal to have an ordered existence, dreams do not have to have meaning; instead she welcomes the garbage of our households, bodies and souls at their most mundane and devalued. Hekate is not trying to teach us something through our dreams though she may be trying to lead. And as a guardian of doors, at what imaginal door might she be beckoning?

I notice over the year who does and does not put anything out for the council pickup. New arrivals, renovators, those preparing to sell, and families all seem to shed their belongings regularly. These are dynamic households in movement and transition. My elderly neighbours seem to have much less stuff to discard. Have they already with each transition, departure of a child, death of a spouse, or retirement shed all they need to shed? Are they comforted and comfortable with their possessions? Are memory and familiarity continuing to infuse their possessions with manna? Are they leaving the sorting for the final council pickup to others? The council pickup reminds that there will come a time that we too will be moved from the centre of life to the verge.

Council is the arm of political power which is closest to daily life and whose primary role is about reassurance of our conscious viewpoints through keeping the streets clean, removing graffiti and

keeping the environs ordered by regulating parking, moving on the homeless, dispersing idle teenagers, reprimanding unruly school children, monitoring pedestrian crossings and catching Hekate's favourite animal, stray dogs. This is the work of consciousness, Apollo and Saturn at their best, yet there is something emotionally satisfying in recognising an underworld goddess beckoning us to look beyond the obvious. Certainly my children would have no difficulty seeing the Queen of Witches constellated in our house when it is time to clean their rooms.

Returning home I feel a little less concerned to sort and discard, as I know there will be other council pickups. I know that I have made myself and my gardening neighbour happy by metaphorically looking back and taking some of her plants which, like the soccer boots in the hallway and the many things scavenged for many different reasons from the street, have been reprieved from Hekate this time around. But perhaps this was always her aim, to enliven the street community, to allow us to sort and to bring shadow parts of ourselves, our garbage, into the light of day and see that there is no shame in it, for Hekate is also "the luminous one" who travels at night with a torch to bring illumination to the hidden places.

Perhaps the story god of the council pick up is Hekate's blessing of discarded parts of ourselves so that we too may pick up some counsel for ourselves.

