

[Sections of Tenderness]

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## Reading List

### *Literature*

Angela Carter – the Bloody Chamber

Ann Sexton – *Sleeping Beauty*

selected versions of fairy tales and folklore from the Grimms, Hans Christian Andersen, Charles Perrault, and Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont

Tannith Lee – *Wolfland*

Jack Zipes – Don't Be on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Tales from North America and England

Barbra Helen Berger – When the Sun Rose

Lauren Mills – Tatterhood and the Hobgoblins

Sylvia Plath – Ariel

Greek myths: Medusa, Echo and Narcissus

*...with inspiration from*

Rusty Morrison – the true keeps calm biding its story

Elizabeth Gilbert – Eat, Pray, Love

Cheryl Strayed – tiny beautiful things

Sarah Kay and Phil Kaye

Kelly Rae Roberts – Taking Flight: Inspiration and Techniques to Give Your Creative Spirit Wings

Sarah Manguso – "A Glittering"

Robert Creely – "The Language"

### *Visual Art*

James Christensen – "Flight of the Fablemaker", "Once Upon a Time"

selections of Kelly Rae Roberts

## Abstract

*Once upon a time there was a young woman who desperately wanted to be a writer. She took classes from great teachers and read the writings from great authors. She filled notebooks with her ideas and her poems, said and thought intelligent things, asked questions. She chased poetry around with a butterfly net. But poetry continued to evade her.*

*The problem was that the girl was afraid of her own voice. There was a terrible time once in her life when many people told her to put her voice away. It was too loud, too sensitive, too thoughtful, too smart, too gleeful, too much. She locked that voice away, buried it deep, and tried her best to avoid it. She wrote like other people wrote, and told the stories of others. Her inspiration began to drain out of her, and she found she had no other stories to tell. She had told all the stories she could think of. All the while, there were whispers in the back of her head: "Let me out," it murmured. "Let me out. I have something to say."*

This is a story of becoming. I have gone three years dodging and refusing to give a name or a face to the past for fear that I might become lost in it. But for the sake of my writing, I desired a way to tell that which I have been afraid to tell.

It is for this reason that I chose a fairy tale format in which to deliver this work, following the honorable lineage of such strong women writers as Ann Sexton, Angela Carter, and Tannith Lee. The fairy tale has, itself, an eclectic heritage and a lineage that includes appropriation, tweaking, and rendering. These women, in their own right,

utilized the fairy tale in a way that is truly inspiring. Ann Sexton, in her gruesome renderings of particular tales like "Sleeping Beauty", found bold (if not distressing) new truths in tales that had been cushioned to protect innocence. Angela Carter approached tales with a fresh sense of self-sustainment: her female protagonists were no longer catalysts of change, but those affected by it; those tales like "Bluebeard" where the woman were saved only by the hands of men changed to self-heroism, or sometimes, rescue by another woman. And Tannith Lee took a fairy tale everyone knows – "Little Red Riding Hood" – and bathed it in a gothic light, offering transformation as the ultimate solution to suffering. These types of fairy tales helped guide me through self-reflection. A fairy tale is a flexible and forgiving vehicle for self-discovery; the stories may have changed over the years, but the ultimate goal remains the same: will the underdog rise out of the rubble of their life?

This prospect of ultimate resolution pushed me forward. With a little coaxing, a voice emerged that belonged to no one but myself.

*The girl resisted the voice at first. She didn't trust it – "You got me in trouble once," she told the voice. But the voice persisted: "I have something to say." The girl, afraid of losing poetry completely, decided to try. She sat down at a desk with a pen and said, "Okay. I'm listening."*

*And the girl began to write. It was fraught with shame and fear, but also with determination. The girl cried, put her pen down and walked away over and over again saying, "I cannot do this." But always, she returned to the page. And what emerged was*

*sometimes beautiful and sometimes disturbing; sometimes there was triumph and sometimes there was only sadness.*

*But always there was truth.*

**Prologue: 1960. Monterey Bay.**

She wanted glamour, snug  
against her kidneys.

*"I'm sorry about Auschwitz.*

*we*

*did what we could."*

Her image hollows, but only  
just - "Yes.

what we

could." She car-

-ried a loafer

of flayed rawhide.

Her innards howl

with rage; she reapplies her lipstick.

Her forearms are a smooth, Russian

leather.

Off the coast of Southern California,

a loafer is suspended .

**the Cross-over**

[I wish I could tell you something

closer then the sad.

Almost like me but false.

I could tell you the true story of a princess with porous skin.

She turns into a wolf in the end.

That. Is the truth.]

**The Dancing Bear** (after *Beauty and the Beast*)

Her uncle told her the boy who broke her heart would die.

He made her touch his arm. "Feel that?"

That's how hard I love you. And they should be afraid."

At night she danced as a bear.

Her uncle made her touch his arm. "And you should be afraid."

He carried a switch blade always.

At night she danced as a bear. She wore the mountains on her back.

Her grandmother was afraid of the wild.

He carried a switch blade always.

"Ma," her uncle roared, "I'll kill you the first bear I see. I'll bring you his back, and crown you the mountain queen."

Her grandmother was afraid of the wild

Russian bears, carrying winter on their shoulders.

"Ma," her uncle roared, "I'll kill you the first bear I see."

He wears her pelt now.

She carried winter on her shoulders.

No boy will ever love her naked now.



**Snegurochka (after the Grimm Brother's rendition of *the Snow Maiden*)**

She has no self  
image in frozen waters.

She is fifteen and already a witch,  
and they want to burn her. Once,  
there was Snegurochka,  
who dreamed of being  
a lovely summer girl.

Her accusers averted their gaze –  
“Snegurochka will lure you into winter and  
turn you to stone.” Fire  
meant nothing to her. Just a way to dance faster.

Her accusers were bare-handed and  
barbed-tongued.  
Snegurochka, the winter maiden, could not burn.

**Good Enough** (after the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus)

She wanted a lover strong and

Mortal: a kind of anchor to a precipice.

She bent in knots, flinging herself

Through those mountains. Hands too small

For grasping: a shadow sill learning

To be the flame: she lost her voice, and hid behind replies.

He appeared golden and dry, lithe as mountain grasses.

Just as sharp. His eyes reflected

The high lakes.

She wore calluses gleaming like quartz formations.

He'd say, "I don't want you."

"Want you." He'd say, "Don't

Touch me."

"Touch me." He'd say, "You can't

Have me, I'm not good enough."

"Have me...good enough."

Her lover didn't require water to survive. Only violent movement.

Echo: a kind of vibration: a ripple effect causing only

Bruises the color of lupine blossoms.

She was always the end of the conversation.

## **Snake Bites**

Silent. In a flock of white  
doves, the sooty starling must remain  
silent. Snake bites: raised stretch marks for clarity.  
Back bone cracked. Devotion:

once, a girl's name meant "Protectoress",  
meticulous as any spider.  
Neptune, so many hungry mouths, swallowed Protectoress whole.

There's a bundle on the girl's head.  
She is ashen with seething voices. No one knows  
what color her eyes are.

Snake bites remind the bearer of the protection  
her name once carried.

## **Nazi Lover 1.0**

A scapel between my clamped  
shell shucked me.

Cockles: heart-shaped pain  
receptors with a pearl between  
their broken hinges. My moans  
my creaks greased away. Faith:

an opening to a big space. I panicked  
sharp: a butcher's showcase.

## **Splinters**

Selfish and selfless both

a lessening of the self.

Preserve the body but – never

at the cost of some

other body.

A girl's patience is confused

with pretty blue eyes (there are cinders under her fingernails).

Patience splinters

with the broom in her hand.

(No one knows this part of the story:

the sooty starling, red-jeweled eyes

stalks and blinds the evil sisters after

years of splintering).

## **the Confines of Fear**

Babushka had a yellow rose bush: an alter:

“the place of slaughtering”. Lovely bones

populated the soil beneath.

The granddaughter was bitter as thistle blossoms, just

as out of control. Babushka was afraid of anything

could stain her opal skin. She locked granddaughter away deeply

under her tongue: a grotto with a white picket fence.

Babushka, she ate the granddaughter

to help her roses grow. Under the alter away from sight no one

could touch the tender opal skin. Unintentionally

Babushka taught her granddaughter subterranean living. Out of the slaughtering,

grew a field of thistles, clawing the alter to shreds.

**the Cross-over**

[I have no reflection in  
the mirror. I burn but I  
will  
not scream. I promise  
I don't bite  
in my sleep. The flat surface

of the raven's back  
should not be heavy like  
silence: up-right, not weight-bearing. Some  
times my thread -

bare arms cross  
over my head.  
blurry with chipped almonds.

I never meant  
to sleep  
walk into winter. ]

## **Nazi Lover 2.0 – a Sonnet**

She steals her darling's skinning blade –  
the one under the hole in the mattress.  
She fillets him open. Ripe and oozing,  
she burrows herself head-first into  
the heat of his beautifully wretched body.  
She hugs his lungs, ripe as cow tongues  
to her aching breasts; his liver tucked safe between her knees;  
her ankles caressed by his growling gut,  
his bladder warm about her feet. His  
kidneys stone her lower back. The only place for his pulpy heart is  
between her teeth. He pulses and throbs ashy, pungent  
as the back of an oven.

It is quiet and damp in here, as snug  
as the unmarked trench he dug for her screaming.



## **The Girl and the Leopard**

Once upon a time there was a Girl and there was a Leopard.

And Girl loved Leopard because he was wild and fierce.

She braided his throat songs into *kipus*.

There was Girl and there was Leopard,  
and Girl thought Leopard loved her. She made a bed  
of daisies to wait upon.

Luna smiled upon the two of them.

But Leopard was greedy. He wanted to be loved instead of lover for  
once. Leopard played hide-and-seek with Girl through a Forest of Night-things.

There was Girl and there was Leopard,  
and Girl searched for Leopard through Forest of Night-things. Her feet were punctured, her  
elbows scraped, tangled tree branches and sleeping sparrows.  
Her hands went numb.

There was Girl and Leopard was gone for the rainy season.  
Girl couldn't tell time anymore. Luna grew plump  
and full, then diminished into nothing. Leopard didn't come.

There was Girl. Girl learned how to tell time alone.

**the Cross-over**

[Alone is just

an angel with dark silences.

I want to walk slowly through this

life needs all the salt it can get.

Even when embraced I am not

enfolded. I dance because I forgot

how to speak. ]

## **Fenrir's Daughter**

Heart-shaped mouth glittering

pieces of worship on the floor.

A wolf-eyed girl; diaphanous skin stretches.

She must walk on all fours. Curls in the corner

away from the roaring furnace.

Fenrir's fur bristled, his throat wailed with ghosts, eyes

jewel-green twilight.

He would swallow the King of Gods one day.

A wolf clad in iron, the might

of winter in his jaws. His teeth are the Carpathians,

his tail is the Fertile Crescent.

The Aryans came. Plastered the beast in

little yellow stars. A thousand

mouths exhaled. Streets strewn with glass. Lock

those mouths in the furnace.

So few of Fenrir's daughters remain.

Six million voices burned; the wolf-

girl clutches a single yellow star. Flanks heave.

The key to her confine hangs about her neck.

**the Garnet Choker (after Angela Carter)**

Hulking, iron-clad lover, his chest  
cool to the touch, clicking and whirring with clockwork, offered her  
a choker of garnets

locking her voice in her esophagus.

After their encounter, thighs  
blushing, he presented her a ring of keys.  
“This is your home. Be free to explore. Except  
for the attic. That is mine.”

Bare essentials. This house echoed  
hollow, stainless as the lover’s chest. The key  
to the attic was delicate.  
the door, well-greased.

A butcher’s show room: rusting shackles and the rank stink  
of failure. Skewered slabs of meat oozed. Blood  
blossomed in rich gardens.

The lover’s heart, red and plump  
with bite marks, patched with broken  
needle work. Upon the floor,  
the organ twitched and shuddered.

When he returned, his attic was wide  
and breathing moldy gasps and  
she held his secret with both hands.

She loosed her first howl.

## **Briar Rose**

Once there was a girl who lived off of those who stumbled upon her. Eyes

filmy and jewel-green when the light caught them: nighttime. Sharper

than her teeth. Russian children are told to carry knives in winter time and never wear red – once there was a girl who wore red and now she is locked behind the briar.

She looked thirsty. No one came

for many moons. Only the girl in the corner who looked like her stayed.

Russian children are told to avoid mirrors. A red coat: considered a sacrifice: the girl behind the briar stayed silent, a dry

festering in her mouth. Her lips were red but her hair had lost its luster.

Mirrors create a sacrifice. The briar girl was thirsty. The girl in the corner looked just like her, framed

in salty sheen and red luster. Her hand was cool to the touch. The briar girl often lunged and the girl in the corner did the same. Red often smeared the barrier between them.

Both girls look thirsty. Both fall to all fours, their mouths open wide.

### **In the Kitchen**

She prays in a temple of bones and gnaw marks.

Lonely stains; in moments of betrayal,  
the body's clockwork floods.

All of the spoons have holes in the middle.

She broke the wishbone straight

out of the carcass, the ice maker

rattles an offer to keep the broken pieces

well-preserved. Her heart fits perfectly in the little blue tea cup.

### **Transformation (after Tannith Lee)**

Russian children are taught to carry knives in winter. Red never leaks past the boundaries in winter woods. She wears a red coat miles long.

She is the clattering of empty wooden bowls.

She left her guts with Baba Yaga, purple with winter's teeth, in exchange

for freedom from a confine of thorns. Baba Yaga burned her winter coverings into blooming red flowers.

Red is the color of winter vision. The silence is ice-slicked stones.

Hallowed by a full solstice moon, the winter phantoms begin their chanting.

Even in winter, the skeletal foliage clings to its little red berries like good luck.

Winter phantoms chant; her red coat miles long. She clatters like empty wooden bowls. Russian children always carry knives in winter.

In the deep edges, winter vision blooms like a poppy field.



**the Cross-over**

[Dead star: the present.  
Life is actually a circle  
Before dawn. Silence,

a professional quiet,  
in a dark suit with no face.  
Immense dreamscape: oceans static white-  
noise of no return.

One bony finger presses  
chapped lips inward. Hush -  
darkling, the Prairie Wolf howls at high tide.

Come for me, Nosferatu.  
Poor half-angel black and white stark  
as stone-gazing.]

### Nightmare #37

Echoes: a response from

no one but the self.

He breaks he

breaks he            me            breaks me

breaks all my openings. *When the Lord closes a door*

*somewhere*

there are no windows.

I drop my tongue down a well.

Vastness feeds the salt inside my hunger.

**Dawn's Lion (after Barbra Helen Berger)**

A friend comes to see me.

She rides a lion bare-back

and bare-footed she dances through

my door: a cleaved rose

layers in the prettiest gold. It is early mornings

when I live stories. Every morning

I offer a slice: to dream of drowning. And now a dock

chained. I can't remember.

I wish I could tell Dawn something closer than the sad:

*courage*, "to speak

from the heart". All who grieve

we might have lost. Every morning

Dawn and her lion come. Once upon a time there was a lonely girl

removes her patch-work

mask, falls .

**(Day)dream #51**

I lost my girl skin at a gas station  
in Tucson. I was wolf and I  
was running, the grass golden.  
There were rabbits. Breathless  
trees, smaller sky. I kiss  
with an iron clang.

I want to strip my paper away:  
the birch skin peels in summer. I was  
wolf and I was running.  
My stomach  
growled louder than my throat.

## **Mother Truth**

Frau Trude caught me rising. Holocaust: a burnt offering to the Divine.

She opened a sugar-stained window, kissed my red-plumed breast;  
said, "Fly, little cardinal of my hearth. Learn me a story I do not know."

I flew east to winter. Wings of curious fire. In the north, learned to breathe underwater.

In the flat south, earth and I spoke  
in whispers. With an ear to the gravel, I found forgiveness.

The cardinal always returns to the hearth. Frau Trude said, "Tell me, child:  
tell me a story." And I said: "There is a girl with porous skin who thought she  
would never burn. She turns into a wolf in the end. That is the truth."

## **Release**

My love sets fire to a little blue house.

I'm considered white noise:

if I'm to use my

voice open

my mouth wide to

allow a slight breeze.

Take a bit of blue house.

Put it in this jam jar.

I sleep with a pick-ax under my pillow.

A silver spoon.

A toothy necklace white.

The only part not burning:

the window: past provisional.

## *Holocaust*

To fight cliché is to fight the truth about the Divine –

(in other words, *rabbi*, said to be the string between the Almighty and the tin can of human kind (in other words, *rabbi* was first used to mean *teacher* with affection (in other words, the Divine: teacher of perplexed scenarios))).

Dig the Divine out of the frozen ground, swallow its gritty essence whole – cleanse yourself of parasites. The world is a sticky thing that attaches itself to the back of our hands. The Divine is laughing –

(in other words, the truth about the Divine is found deep in hibernation) in other words, the kind of dream that lasts a very long time. The Divine first taught us to speak with our hands. The mouth was just a precaution (in other words we learned to taste only by learning to hold))).

The Divine laughs loudly, full as a lotus blossom (in other words, that which grows only in the wettest of earth). The Divine's laugh is a kind of mantra –

(in other words, the row boat by which one pulls themselves through a loud noise) in other words, Charon, dragging his barge across the howling Styx, grins eternally, repeating the same stroke (in other words, the *holocaust* is the same burnt smell and yet we are blessed every time we perish in fire))).

We can all be quartered into sections of tenderness, and in each section, the Divine is laughing always.