

## Rachel ROSE

Fiction, nonfiction, poetry

### Excerpt from **The Glass Eye:**

Three weeks after he started grade four, Cedar Wisen came home from school and took out his sister's left eye with a screwdriver. I was in the bow of *The Dreamer* when I first heard Rose scream. Everything happened very slowly and very fast. Cedar brought the screwdriver closer so he could study Rose's eye, dark and wet as a grape. Nia, their mother, appeared--*Cedar!* Red was leaking everywhere, and Rose's screams flew into our clothes, into our ears, like hornets--*Jesus Christ, Cedar!*

Then as Rose continued to scream, Jack, their father, emerged, and then my mother, Grace, and finally the helicopter, landing by the feedlot of the cow pasture. Rose was put on a stretcher and she and my mother were flown to the mainland. The eye and the screwdriver flew with them in a bag of ice. Just that fast, they were gone, lifting over the bay, saplings bending back and forth in their wake--*Good-bye, Rose, good-bye.*

We were alone with the echo of Rose's screams, which had been drowned out by the helicopter's roar. As the trees stopped swaying around us, the screams seemed to return. We all stood there on deck, not knowing what to do with ourselves, except for Cedar, who was sitting at the wheel of *The Dreamer*, pretending to steer.

Sometimes I can tell what's going to happen before it does, and I knew Nia was going to go after Cedar. She charged across the empty feedlot, bounded up the ladder to the deck and cuffed her son so hard she knocked him down. I exhaled; I'd been holding my breath, waiting for her to do exactly that. She kicked him, hard; his back, his head, his legs. Cedar folded in on himself, protecting his glasses, which were always getting broken. He grunted with the impact, but did not cry out. Jack just stood there watching, his arms held slightly away from his sides, as though he had been burned. Nia got Cedar square in the face with her foot. His nose burst into blood, his lip flared open. Another kick--crack went his glasses, and Jack moved in to wrestle Nia away.

"Bastard!" she screamed, as Jack pinned her arms. "You *monster!* You took Rose's eye out!"

Cedar didn't look back as he jumped down the last few rungs of the metal ladder to the ground and took off, leaping like a bobcat through Nia's big garden. He left a trail of blood across *The Dreamer's* deck. Time was still rubbery. I remember Jack going below for a sponge. We kids all stayed very still, trying to make order from chaos. Jack wiped down the deck as Nia started their rusty pickup and drove off in a swirl of dust.

That was the last time any of us saw Cedar. He was gone, and Rose's eye was gone, and that was it. Nobody could find him, which didn't make sense on an island the size of Honey.

(First published in *The Alaska Quarterly Review*.)

Excerpt from **The Invisible Worm:**

I am lucky enough to have had my hands inside corpses. The anatomy professor at McGill must have thought I was nuts: the sole literature major in a sea of pre-med students. I needed his permission to enroll, and he asked what I wanted from the course. "I'm just curious," I said. Reason enough to study any subject.

The first time we entered the anatomy lab, we were struck at the door by the stench. When the plastic sheeting was pushed off the first torso, and we got to open the skin flaps, weigh the organs in our hands, we did not talk. We were possessors of a gift. These kidneys had once purified the blood. This heart had worked well for many years. I remember the genitals were especially hard to look at, reeking of briny chemicals, nearly devoid of hair. But one quickly becomes comfortable with the strangest things, the foulest smells.

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I have often wondered if the one thing my parents had in common was a higher-than-usual tolerance for the disgusting. My father, for example, doesn't think anything of breaking a dog biscuit in half and sharing it with his dog. He doesn't blink at slaughtering a cow, wading with gumboots through the entrails, hanging the meat amid a buzzing of more bluebottle flies than I'd ever thought there could be in the entire world.

My mother, as a doctor, has overcome the usual disgust conditioning. In a typical day, she will have her fingers up strangers' rectums and vaginal canals. She will swab noses and smear snot on glass slides, draw blood and spin it, wipe traces of shit onto test strips and pour chemicals on them. This is simply her job.

Because my parents didn't raise me with the usual level of aversion to disgusting things, I was a strange child. I loved all creatures, without distinction. I had no prejudice against the slimy or the scaled. Most of my summers were spent in the water or the woods catching bullfrogs, red-bellied newts, and garter snakes. I had a turtle named Salmonella who liked to eat raw hamburger right from my hand in wise, deliberate bites. I also liked to dissect any dead animals which crossed my path. I kept them in a freezer and boiled their bones until the flesh fell off. No, I was not a serial killer in training. I simply wanted to see how they were put together.

When my classmates found the bat on the playground, they brought me to it. And that is when my lack of disgust almost proved fatal.

It was such a cute little bat! Smaller than a hamster, it was crawling around in the dirt at the edge of the playground, dragging its fuzzy body around on hooked thumbs. It blinked at me as I scooped it up with some paper towels. I smuggled it home in a pocket. When I held it in my hands, it licked the salt from my fingertips, then licked its snub nose with a long pink tongue. I put it in a birdcage with a piece of orange and it hung upside down, blinking and grinning.

My mother took one look at its foaming mouth and said, "That bat has rabies."

(First appeared in *Black Warrior Review*.)

**Bat**

She staggered round the playground in the sand.  
Then hung from my sweater on hooked thumbs.  
I let her cross from hand to open hand.  
She licked her snout, licked salt from my palms.  
I hid her in my jacket on the bus.  
She was a black ball of yarn with two hooks.  
She winked as if we had much to discuss.  
I was nothing like those girls too scared to look.  
The bat shimmied up my hair, grimaced a grin,  
her face a puckered rose, drunk on sun.  
Mother made me box the bat and drove us to town,  
odd girl holding odd girl. They took her away, to be  
undreamed by chloroform. Which I learned meant killed.  
We screamed as our mothers held us down,  
while the doctor stabbed and our fathers paid the bill.

Rabid fear quenched curiosity. Pain-trapped hands mapped flight.  
But how many brats have been kissed by a bat?

(From *Song & Spectacle*, Harbour 2012.)

**What We Heard About the Americans**

We heard there was much to admire about the Americans.  
Historically.

Their cuisine is buffet, all you can  
overeat.

We heard they hire whisperers, buy guides for  
idiots.

Foster special needs kittens. Are visited by  
aliens.

We heard the Americans are our  
brethren.

That they keep ten percent of black men  
imprisoned.

Are stockpiling weapons for  
Armageddon.

Believe that all good dogs go to  
heaven.

God bless the Americans. God bless their inalienable  
freedoms.

Bless Guantanamo. Americans sure know how to have  
fun.

Even their deaths are more important than our  
own.

Happiness is cosmetic  
dentistry.

The global dream is the American  
dream.

Liberty is a statue holding a soft ice  
cream.

### **What We Heard About the Canadians**

We heard they were not American.  
Not British and not quite French.

They were not born in Hong Kong  
did not emigrate from Russia with a single pair of shoes.

They were not all russet-haired orphans  
who greeted the apple blossom dawn with open arms,

crying *Avonlea!* They were not immodest,  
did not want God to save the Queen.

Their leaders were not corrupt.  
They were not all Mounties on proud horseback

with hot tasers. *Fuck me* was not considered impolite  
in their living rooms.

There was no great Canadian hush of things not to be talked about.  
Not all of them ignored genocide.

Not all of them sang a "cold  
and broken Hallelujah" as the bells broke crystal ice

across parc Lafontaine. They were not rich and also  
not poor. Not overachievers. Neither believers nor unbelievers.

*C'était pas tout l'histoire*, and they would not  
be caught clubbing seals on TV, red bloom

on white coat, melting eyes, they did not mine asbestos  
in Quebec, make love in skidoos,

sleep in snowshoes. Never danced hatless  
under dancing Northern lights. They were polite.

(From *Song & Spectacle*, Harbour 2012.)

## Honey

The artist covered his nude  
subjects in honey, then photographed them. It was  
wasteful and terrible and unforgettable.  
Such varnished vanity,  
torpor of living amber cloaking  
the naked body, slow deliquescence  
preserved. This is how I loved you.  
Honey. Didn't I, fully and sweetly,  
pour myself over you? Didn't you  
bow your head under that thick and holy  
light, that slow weight? No sting,  
only the glistening beauty of the moment  
captured, and after,  
unseen, the sticky, private struggle  
to come clean.

(Forthcoming in *Marry & Burn*, Harbour 2015.)

## Delivery Room Under Renovation

for Susan, for Alec Michael

The night my water broke, a week early,  
I held my wide sides and rocked, knowing  
that before another day came, no matter what the pain,  
you would be born. And then I went upstairs  
to my quiet study. It was two a.m. and my last chance  
to be alone with poetry for what I knew,  
the second time around, would be a long  
exhausted, milk-pocked haul. Every time I stood  
to take a book down from the shelf, your waters  
poured out of me. I sat and wrote until the contractions  
became too strong. Slowly I was drawn by the rope  
around my hips, dipped in and out of that well  
of pain. In between I sipped rose tea,  
marked a few last-minute changes on a manuscript,  
dripped and dripped and dripped.

In the hospital a day later, they handed me you  
in the recovery room. My abdomen had been  
stapled shut and I was still numb from the ribcage  
down. We were in a room full of the knock and rattle  
of jackhammers. Plastic sheeting covered the drywall remodel.  
“You should breastfeed her now,” said the nurse,  
and I couldn’t quite believe it. “Now?” I complained,  
more child than mother, “I’m pretty tired right now,”  
but the nurse set her lips, untied my hospital gown,  
helped that tiny rosemouth yawn and latch  
onto the breast. I gasped as the baby’s tugs burned  
the thin skin, then laughed at her fine round face  
as she squinted at us, blinking her eyes,  
and we were blessed, and wiped our eyes.

The nurse, leaning over my bed, said to us  
they were bringing in a woman to recovery  
whose baby had just died. She did not need  
to ask us to stifle our delight. The woman was wheeled in,  
moaning but sedated. The nurse pulled the curtain  
around her bed, and I held my newborn, her eyes  
still glistening with erythromycin, the small white bonnet  
pulled over her wet hair, and only a thin curtain  
separated me from the mother whose baby had died:

I don’t mean a metaphorical curtain, I mean a thin  
green hospital curtain on a metal track.  
I wished to, but dared not, pull it back.

(From *Song & Spectacle*, Harbour 2012.)

## Sheets

It has all gone according to plan,  
mine, made when I was ten. My mother divorced the man  
who came to take the place of my father.

Every time we left in her cold car  
I held my breath, hoping we'd go so far  
we couldn't go home: *Please mum; I can make you happy*

but by the time she left I'd long since moved out West  
and learned to love him more, or her less.  
Now she comes to visit me alone, stays for a week

hides the pots in unexpected places, cooks with too much fat.  
He comes for a single night, hangs up his coat and hat  
and picks up his step-grandson. His face has softened with defeat,

as has her own. Each in turn asks me for news of the other,  
and I tell them the parts that hurt--devious daughter--  
the parts that prove they were right to part,

but finally my intentions are pure. I do not tell them how  
between her visit and his I went down  
with my son on one arm, clean sheets on the other, intending

to change the bed, but the smell of roses from the lotion my mother wears  
drifted like a rainstorm up the stairs  
and I turned around, lugging clean sheets and my oblivious baby,

leaving the bed just as it was, awaiting his arrival:  
her scent of roses a reproachful perfume, a rival  
for his dream-time, a thorn--

or perhaps the scent became the dream itself: bouquet  
of ivory wedding roses dried upon a shelf.

(From *Notes on Arrival and Departure*, McClelland & Stewart, 2005.)

## Waiting for the Biopsy Results

We don't talk about it. We put it out of mind.  
 It clings like mist, like cobweb, to our skin.  
 When I wake it presses, sticky, invisible,  
 and in that interlude I can't name the mood,  
 confuse the burst of anticipation with joy,  
 like waiting for a birth. Then the waiting names itself.  
 When the strange red poppy begins to bloom its fear  
 inside me, I refuse, I push back each petal to the hard  
 unbloomed green hat of the bud, the hat that women wear  
 when their hair falls out, I will not let it open its heart,  
 I will not take this flower until the call comes  
 and I must take this flower.

## Ways to Begin A Poem

1.

Begin at the source. Open the book of thyself,  
 contentious one, thy book in four chapters, four scrolls.  
 Rise on your own yeast. Spill your villanelles'  
 hot vowels. You will not go  
 blind. Though imagine what you might see  
 if you did.

2.

Begin with a friend (a writer) playing a board game  
 at a party. Question: something found in a desk  
 that starts with J. His answer: Jizm. Haiku the difference  
 between men and women. Stray red leaf.

3.

Begin with seed, then. The way we touch each  
 other. Flipped: a car on fire after a game involving men  
 in padded suits. Brute mob drenched in fuel. Saltpeter.

4.

Fertilized papyrus  
 of undecipherable texts. Ink licked to language,  
 stanza after stanza of buttons popped. Terza rima  
 of nipples, navel, quilt washed in light.

5.

Outside bombs dismantle a station. Somewhere else  
not here. Begin again, please. Pantoum com-  
munion. To be written, to be folded into shapes  
suited to the poem. Smell of a river waiting for salmon.

6.

Not here. Begin again, please. Pantoum: come  
inside my body. Joy of song without words  
suited to the poem. Smell of a river waiting for salmon.  
Silhouette of your form against a torn white curtain.

7.

Poem of thy creases. O where have you been, sweet  
reeking ballad monster?  
Pray that tomorrow will know by heart  
today. Begin by holding hands  
under the table. A hip kisses a tambourine  
a troubadour is condemned for her troubles.  
Our love meets in the ruins of a castle  
full of ravens. We

8.

buy daffodils, we play the cello badly but with joy.  
We grow yellow tomatoes. We let them cut us open  
put children in the garden. Remembering the loneliness  
of the lunch room, we decide not to have children.  
If the form can be found, there may be salvation.  
There are lilacs. Lilacs have form. It is quiet  
but for the poem's gasp. We bone thrust until we bruise  
apart. Naked in the kitchen, we slice chanterelles for dinner,  
add a fistlump of butter, crushed sage. Fragrance enters  
your hair. My own. Is there one god, or many? Evening star  
calls forth a thousand more in the pale green mosque  
of the sky. Stretch marks. Two lemons on a table. Still life.  
Begin with the body, poisoned to save the body.  
Tragicomedy. The form.

(From *Song & Spectacle*, Harbour 2012.)

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