

The Bark Babe, and friends

Alice Butler, October 2015



1. Prelude: Girl and Tree (Spit, Axe, Spoon)

Once upon a time there was an ogre with hair as long as Rapunzel, and limbs as long as her hair. She had ripples in her skin that would flake away like bark, or grow moss in the rain. Craters would form behind her knees, and in her crotch, then fill with water. Weeds and insects hugged her woodchip shell, often crawling towards, in, and around her cunt, as if an Ana Mendieta earth-body-sculpture. Just like in *Tree of Life* from 1976, when the artist, covered in mud and grass, eyes closed and arms open, literally became part of the landscape: a sensual, erotic merging.

But that's skipping forward, too quickly: the ogre of our story is a primeval feminist, as dislocated from time as her body is mangled and severed in places. She liked to commit the crimes that had been done to her, this armless creature, with rotten and raw tree-trunks for legs. And she had a long nose, like witches do, as lethal as a knife, or an axe. It helped her smell the flesh she craved round corners, the dark and mysterious pathways that made up the woods she called home. *Why should it always fall to me to clean and cook?* She often thought to herself. The boys would pay. No longer would they pinch her ripe bum-cheeks, and grab at her bark flesh: she would cut off their heads and cook them first, then eat them as a delicious meat stew with a glass of wine *for one*. Red with red.

She is the etching: the black and white document of the tale, inscribed for posterity.

Her name could be:

Judith, the virile slayer of Holofernes

Philomela, who killed her sister's son to spite his father for rape and mutilation

Or Plate 9: They do not want to (No quieren.)

2. *The way to a man's heart is through his stomach*

In the ninth etching by Francisco Goya published in *The Disasters of War*, a grotesque old hag, hating on the heteronormative, pulls a dagger at a love-struck couple in embrace. Or maybe she's trying to protect the helpless girl creature from his assaulting grasp. Either way, she is the killer. But it is the father that is the cannibal... with a taste for his own children. He is the greedy god Saturn, depicted by Goya in the murals he painted straight onto the walls of his Quinta del Sordo farmhouse outside Madrid. The house was as decrepit as the artist's aging body, and the paintings as private and fantastical as dream, or nightmare.

Marina Warner has argued that what swings myth and fairytale the patriarchal favour is that while women might do the killing, *they do not eat their offspring on purpose, nor are they duped into feasting off their own children*, whereas the innocent fathers gorge for pleasure.

But could there be a different ending, I wonder, in which the mother stuffs her face, juices leaking from her mouth, transgressive in her shame?

Or the nuclear family gets swallowed forever?

In 1976, the artist Bobby Baker baked a family of cake. With chicken wire used as skeleton, and dough as flesh, in this appetite-whetting installation, there was a life-size mum and dad, with kids, to feast on. The figures were installed in a pretend house, a bit like a doll's house, and the audience was invited to make it all disappear by eating it. It lasted a week, and then the family was gone forever, with only a few ghost-like crumbs left over as evidence of the feast.

3. *My mother she killed me. My father he ate me...*

Goya's dad-cannibals, as well as the bark-witch of the prelude, call to mind the protagonists that both kill and eat in the Grimm Brothers' tale of incestuous cannibalism 'The Juniper Tree'. Written in a spooky, syntax-free style, with deadened expressions of intent (such as: 'The thought came to her that she would kill him'), this macabre fairytale narrates a father's mistaken cannibalism, and the subsequent demise of the wicked stepmother murderess. The story goes like this: after being given hope by a spiritual juniper tree that she will conceive a child, a sweet and domestic, but previously barren, woman *and* wife, has a baby boy who is *as red as blood* and *as white as snow*; but soon after the birth she dies. The delicious juniper berries, which she gorged on during the pregnancy, poisoned her, and with her last dying wish, she asks to be buried under the miracle baby-giving tree. Fast-forward a few years, and the dad has found a new wife, who's had a new daughter. Obviously, the evil step-mum loves the girl but hates the boy, and one day she tempts him with an apple before chopping off his head with the lid of a chest as he dug around inside it for the red, ripe fruit. With a nifty tie of a handkerchief, she ends up tricking her daughter, Marlinchen, into thinking she has

killed her own brother, and convinces the girl that together they will cook him up in a stew and no-one will be any the wiser (the revenge of the domestic *a la* Martha Rosler in her *Semiotics of the Kitchen* of 1975). Boy, does the dad love the taste of his own son, and while he eats, the daughter gathers up the reject bones of her dead brother and buries them under the same juniper tree as his deceased mum. From his remains erupts a fire, and out flies a bird. It is the boy in feather-form, and after a bit of flying about the village, picking up gifts, he bestows his dad with a gold necklace, and his step-mum with a millstone. This bread-giving tool kills the wicked woman, stone dead, and the boy comes back to life to eat happily ever after with his surviving family.

The story might scream evil stepmother, but maybe she was just bored of grinding wheat and baking bread, and the only way she could get her revenge on the whole kitchen domestic fantasy was to cook up her stepson. To dirty the table and bloody the centrepiece.

I wonder if the tree-witch of the etching is the evil stepmother reincarnated: powerful in death. She is axing her way round town, this bark babe: not only cooking up meals for father-cannibals, but dining on them herself.

4. *A stew of feminist fairytales*

Perhaps it's more fun, more radical, to play in the old houses of fairytale and rearrange the furniture, for even if we renounce these tales, they will still be there, always present, to be passed on through books and chatter. *New wine in old bottles* was the metaphor favoured by Angela Carter: a manifesto of sorts that reached its climax in the fairytale collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). In the 'The Company of Wolves', for example, Carter doesn't just update 'Little Red Riding Hood', she reappropriates it, with reworked narrative and style, to let the young girl heroine's sexuality, and her body, speak. She is the usual snow-white and ruby-red, but it is more visceral and messy than before:

Her breasts have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white and she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month.

And so, *as the forest closed upon her like a pair of jaws*, she ventures out into the woods with Grandma's house her destination, but she meets a handsome stranger on her way, and they decide to chase each other to see who gets there quickest. The prize if he wins? A kiss. He might get there first and gobble up poor Grandma, but when the young girl arrives, her weapon is laughter (not to mention a knife), and she trusts in her own sexuality to win what she desires. To the wolf's *all the better to eat you with* feral hunter quip, *the girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat*. Instead, she opts to *pick out the lice from his pelt and eat them*, quelling her own hunger.

Carter's tales enact a perverse rewriting of gender and genre, where young girl desire is not silenced or stoned. 'She' can eat as much as she likes, similar to the guessing game of Barbara T. Smith's 1973 performance *Feed Me*, in which the artist sat naked on a bed surrounded by bread, cheese, fruit and wine, and the participants had to intuit what it was that *she* wanted. Assuming the role of both the seducer and the seduced, the artist holds all the power, and the right, to choose... from the little red-cloaked girl's basket of treats.

In Lorrie Moore's aptly titled collection of short stories *Bark* (2014), published a little over two centuries after the Grimm Brothers' *Children's and Household Tales*, is her own titular version of the juniper tale. It is a story of female friendship and feminist consumption, which begins with the first-person narrator's guilt over not visiting her sick friend, Robin Ross, before she died. Robin is a playwright with a penchant for the fairytale rewrite, and in her garden grow *apple, juniper, hazelnut, and rosebushes*: shrubby homages to the trees that are characters in her stories. After Robin's death from cancer, friends Pat and Isabel scoop up our narrator and take her to Robin's house, promising lots of fun and gin rickeys: what follows is part ghost-story, part dream-sequence, as the living girls encounter the dead girl (with only a 'scarf' to hold her head on). Just like the little bird-boy of the original. This meeting of judgment, dance, laughter and reconciliation

helps the narrator remember the last dinner she and Robin shared together, and the story ends with the folklorist playwright smothering an entire lemon meringue pie all over her face, the cream clinging to *her skin like blown snow*, before taking a *deep dramatic bow* – owning the performance, and winning back the right to eat – for pleasure and for fun.

‘Bark’ might be the stuff of the tree-witch but it also reminds me of dog, of wolf: the feral revenge reincarnate, as in ‘The Company of Wolves’, or Carter’s ragged and wild, *and* bleeding, ‘Wolf-Alice’. In the essay ‘On the Feraltern’, Dodie Bellamy describes the feeling of being born working class in Hammond, a small suburb outside Chicago, but writing in avant-garde and bourgeois, San Francisco circles: *I can still feel like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, or worse, a wolf in a dress*. She is a wolf that writes, though, over and through the historical narrative, deforming it *with* form, and with desire.

Across many objects, drawing and sculptures, Kiki Smith has also reimagined the girl and wolf’s carnal bond. It’s there in *Daughter* (1999), a white paper sculpture of the young woodland maiden growing wolf-like fur all over face. And in the ink and pencil drawing *Lying with the Wolf* (2001), the artist conflates Charles Perrault’s tale with the story of St. Genevieve, depicting a moment of feral intimacy, as the two creatures lie recumbent together, a tightly woven mass of flesh and fur.

These characters make up The Sisters Grimm. Their work is feral, monstrous, visceral and grotesque. But it is also indebted to community, and laughter, and I think they’ll like the artist of the etching, the author of the bark babe character, who cuts off heads and limbs not only to keep herself alive but to kill off what is stale, what has gone off. The bark babe is not a slave to the millstone, or a victim of the millstone. She is perverse and powerful, this evil stepmother, feasting on her own home-cooked stew.

I’ve been wondering what a feminist reading of ‘The Juniper Tree’ might be, and I think this might be it.

Image: Kate Lyddon, *Girl and Tree (Spit, Axe, Spoon)*, 2015
Etching on paper, 17.1 x 22.7 cm, edition of 10 plus 3 A.P.

Commissioned to accompany the exhibition
Zabludowicz Collection Invites: Kate Lyddon
12 November–20 December 2015

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