

# KEPT

Poems by Adrianna Robertson

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for Lorelei

Mother, keep out of my barnyard,  
I am becoming another.  
-Sylvia Plath

## Contents

Her Girlhood Room Set like a Stage	5
Paper Doll	6
Curio	7
I Count Geese, I Count Breaths	8
The Keeper	9
Matryoshka Doll	10
In The Guest Room	11
Curio	12
Truth Garden	13
Girl in Bee Dress (I)	14
Curio	15
Leaves, Blades, Cupboards (I)	16
Hold On	17
Curio	18
Union	19
Self Sculpture in Bone	20
Origami	21
Toward My Blue Peninsula (I)	22
Curio	23
Starving Girl	24-25
Curio	26
What Water Knows	27
Leaves, Blades Cupboards (II)	28
Still Life with Toy	29
Curio	30
Night Garden	31
Curio	32
Mirabilis	33
One Way to Feel	34
Curio	35
Woman with Stone Skirt	36
Silhouette	37
Bird Girl	38
Curio	39
Want As a Tiny Bird Sculpture	40
Curio	41
Girl in Bee Dress (II)	42
Toward My Blue Peninsula (II)	43
Curio	44
Queen of Cups	45
The Other Girl	46
Notes	47
Acknowledgements	48

## Her Girlhood Room Set like a Stage

This is where the star will unravel.

*Left: a vanity with painted pink  
tea roses, its tri-fold mirror waiting to open.*

*Center: a bed canopied  
in china blue gingham and matching ruffled spread.*

*Right: the dolls high on scalloped shelves,  
sit where they must, say little.*

You take Alice down to brush her hair,  
smooth her white eyelet apron.

Feed her make-believe pudding  
from her pretty plastic bowl.

Open-close doll eyes wide  
as you stand Alice in black Mary Jane's.

You hold fingers over little coarse  
lashes, pressing them shut.

## Paper Doll

Once, I was made of paper.  
Vellum and tissue formed the ghost of me.  
I pressed on clothes, folded down the tabs  
over slim shoulders.  
They never stayed. I should have used tape  
to fasten them,  
hold some idea of fullness in my small drawn hand.  
At my perforated dining table, in my exact beauty

of crisp taffeta and lilac feather stole,  
roast turkey and mashed potatoes made of parchment.  
A mind shredding into little balled bits—  
always craving what could be cut out  
of a glossy covered book.  
I rubbed red ink over near-dead lips, pretending  
color could wake my paper face.

Curio

The book begins with a poem  
I read aloud spilling its cry  
into the sky. I count  
the beat of breath.  
In. Out. In. Out.

## I Count Geese, I Count Breaths

In the fairy tale I read over again,  
a girl is lost in a forest filled with lessons  
about finding home.

One wicked witch, two paths  
through the windy wood, three apples.  
Careful, which you choose.

One old bridge, one hill, one house.  
Seven stone steps. I am still here.  
*This is what losing a mind is like.*

I twist hair around my index finger  
until the skin grows numb.  
Under a down duvet, I shiver,

rock my legs back and forth  
to subtract five or ten calories more.  
At 5A.M. running circles

around the pond, ten laps. I count  
geese feasting on damp morning grass.  
I count breaths.

## The Keeper

I choose Abigail.  
Whisper in her cold porcelain ear  
these fall mornings. I button up  
her sweater of hand-knit blue.  
When the hem is askew because a hole is missed,  
I start again—and again.  
I have an eye for a straight line.

Leaves crunch beneath plastic wheels.  
Abigail's head gently bumps along in the stroller.  
I only stop to flip the hood over her head  
when the sun becomes too much.  
Or when I know—as a mother does—  
she is hungry.

I touch the bottle to her hard red lips,  
see the “magic” milk disappear.  
I hum and hush, hug her close—  
but before I take the path back home  
I say *Remember, don't tell a soul.*

## Matryoshka Doll

Am I the girl  
denying herself  
with these pretty painted  
hands? Here I am separating  
in my sarafan, becoming

a smaller version of who  
I began. Beauty is counted  
in negative numbers. Size signals  
to me in smoke, says hope

is lost. These flowers around  
me are fading. Fleeting selves  
seen in a doll's dead eyes.

Nesting nothing in this  
hollow wood house,

I keep warm with lies.

## In the Guest Room

The blue damask wallpaper peels at its seams.  
Stick my index finger underneath  
its thick texture to see how far I can go  
before my mother will notice.

If I open the flap far enough,  
rub my hand along the dried glue,  
can I slip through to another room  
and forget who I am?

I must be a perfect example.  
At this tea party set with small china cups,  
melody from a music box  
that sounds like tin and wind chimes.

I talk in a whisper as if no one can hear.  
*Have some lemon cake. How do you take your tea?*  
My white gloves make it hard to hold on.  
Time grates against a wall in my mind.

All the while, tin and wind chimes.  
Tin and wind chimes.  
The knob winds down to a stop.  
The box's lid shuts on silence.

Curio

How about a turn in the garden?

The window blazes light.  
The garden still as a page.

The quiet dresses motionless  
and I chase a forbidden voice.

Truth Garden

Then I look to the flowers  
for answers. To delphinium,  
columbine, coral bells:  
*who am I?*

Ugly words surface, but they  
erase them all. Sometimes, I pluck  
their patient petals. I could

undo beauty, just like that.  
Really, I wanted to  
reverse it—make beauty  
from nothing. Take dirt,  
and cover my hands

in dark, sticky mud,  
form an other-than-me.  
In winter, I took dolls there.

Arched rubber feet  
disappeared under a cold, white sea.  
Then knees—then hips—then head.

Girl in Bee Dress (I)

This old-fashioned wicker trunk is doing my keeping.  
Sort the contents by number, color, and type.  
Imagine my head is as well-ordered.  
Robin eggs, a magnifying glass, a china doll,  
silk floral fan—the notes  
play in my ballad of balance.

The story is simple, though it never is.  
A girl loses her mind and then  
loses her self. Or she loses her self and then  
her mind. No matter.  
The thrill is in the unexpected.  
*Now you see me—and now you don't.*

Curio

An angry whisper rolls  
into every word. Another door  
in the hallway trailing weeds.

With little quiet clicks, a distant  
telephone  
in the parlor  
listens as in a dream.

I urge someone—  
open the door.

Leaves, Blades, Cupboards (I)

*Show me your bones.*

Tell me what they would say  
if they could speak their reasons.

That is your smile hand-sewn over pursed lips  
(in time the stitches have disappeared).

All but a card trick—sleight of a poised hand.

I understand this well, all show and no tell—  
the body a floor plan of pain.

## Hold On

Notice, the way winter is a season  
of negation. I am comfortable in its lack.  
I cloak my bone house in wool and stare  
out this window.

Trees bend toward breaking.  
I'm in good company  
among these skeletons. Once beauties,  
they will wake in spring—  
but will I?

When I climb the stairs I count  
the days I've gone without.  
I reach the top, walk down  
and start again.  
It's how I magic myself—  
each step is closer to vanishing.

I imagine the ruts in my head, wonder  
how they can be smoothed over or filled in  
with something that looks like forgetfulness.  
If I write it here, will it leave for good?  
If I whittle away the stairs,  
can I barely make my escape?

Curio

I looked a little  
like nobody.  
I was wonderful  
sometimes clever  
but now nothing.

Here, let me show you in the mirror.

## Union

*after St.Catherine of Siena*

I am yours, pared down,  
soul with no need of body.  
Void of want I wait  
for your hand.

A cell soaked in solitude.  
Iron chain meets  
flesh,  
marks bring  
brutal beauty.

Your face blooms  
in my wounds.  
A board, my bed, only water  
touches these lips.  
Faith in the feast

keeps me alive.  
Give me permission  
for pain. Like you, I promise  
I am holed  
and imperfect.

## Self Sculpture in Bone

In the pages of journals  
I am nothing.  
Could this be why  
I am carving a sculpture of just  
that with my body?  
Chiseling away  
contours and comfort  
for a form that doesn't feel.

At the window, I imagine  
being under the snow's blanket,  
kept—by its cold and quiet.  
Eyes closed, ears filling up with snow  
until the volume turns down to silent.

An infinity of negations  
says my brain,  
reads a script of besetting words.  
My mouth is wooden—controlled—  
like a nutcracker. It goes open and shut.  
Open and shut.

*My mouth is wooden, controlled like a nutcracker.  
It goes open and shut. Open and shut. My mouth is wooden  
controlled like a nutcracker it goes open and shut open and shut  
Mymouthiswoodencontrolledlikeanutcrackeritgoesopenandshutopenandshut*

## Origami

Into the slightest version  
of myself, I fold down.

Kami-thin,  
creased into an idea.

To be precise,  
final. Lovely as a sampan

boat, tea cup,  
persimmon. Delicate, then

all gone—a song played  
into extinction.

Toward My Blue Peninsula (I)

I have become a new kind of collector.  
A curator of bones that show  
through skin. Now a surface  
made of rocks and deep fissures.  
I touch them with delicate fingers,  
count them with care.  
There is beauty in the indentation—  
the art of it all.

## Curio

Everything is finally dark.  
Sounds barely call sounds.  
Rustles or rushings so gentle,  
only later can they be heard, felt.

Scraps of speech  
falling like dried leaves.  
A radio playing  
in some distant room.

## Starving Girl

Her body has it memorized.  
The feeling of empty  
and hollow, same as that carved

gully between her cheekbone  
and jaw. Some others would react  
to the pain of deprivation,

fists curled and feet stomping  
until dust rises from the floor  
boards. She smiles—driven

student knowing she has learned,  
can continue to ace her own tests  
of subtraction. Her heart

is not as easily tricked.  
It knows what the body does not—  
there are limits to denial. Cages

of rib keeping the slippery  
smooth muscle pumping  
precise amounts in and out,

all of the time she wasted,  
as she wasted away.  
Once, her bones became sharp

like stones and her thighs the size  
of wrists. She hardly flinched  
as she shrunk to a breathing

specter, to a fraction of vitality.  
Her world becoming smaller, craving  
still—some ideal of being obsolete.

Once, she used pounds as currency,  
hoping to gain what she had gone  
without, succeeded in getting

to a place where self-sacrifice  
is the coveted cost. She could obsess

about the amount in a container  
of yogurt or a slice of bread  
until it kept her up nights,  
running in place—the bedroom

carpet made bare. She would run  
miles outdoors using distance  
to further herself from herself.

Solitude like a cloak of comfort  
wrapped around her boney  
shoulders. Only warmth there

could be in a cavern of cold—  
mine the blackest onyx, a diamond  
set deep within the worthless ore.

Dive down, Dearest. No pretty pearl,  
no beauty exists in this bottomless  
pit. She is her own witch burning

her fleeting flesh at the stake.  
The trick is to unlearn the lust  
for losing, the body only the mirror

of the self. She had to learn  
it over again, lesson that cracks  
the riddle—gives knowledge

there is no charge for acceptance—  
in the face of a face  
that still hangs on hunger.

Curio

One morning still  
a deep-gray,  
I sit listening  
for the garden  
in the dark hallway.

## Philosopher's Daughter

On the soft bed I can no longer feel  
I sometimes dream of losing a limb  
or my eyes opening under water.  
Now summer, ashamed of how exposed  
a swimsuit can be, my mind projects  
a figure, one with thighs and breasts, the complications of curves.

Still, my skin wakes beneath this navy nylon suit  
as I dive in. Calm in the balance of water,  
*Could it give me my body back?*  
Contrast of loose liquid  
to each hurt, hard bone.

Hollow hum of below  
lets me forget the trap my mind sets.  
Or it's down here where weightless,  
all of my emptiness feels held.

Leaves, Blades, Cupboards (II)

In my gold-leaf cabinet you expect  
a collection of books  
though it's strewn with doll heads  
of every kind.

Their glass eyes  
surprise you—a small drop of beauty  
in their eerie orbs.

Placed carefully, sorrow can't hurt you.  
Kept neat, it looks a lot like art.

Still Life with Toy

The ceiling-to-floor  
sundae with its red-eye  
cherry looking at you.

Flaunting its cream cloud  
coating the pearl  
vanilla, meant

to massage you with  
its message of longing.  
For its butterscotch

glows deep from the bottom  
keeping its contents  
warm—wanted. Thin

gray girl you can only  
look away—grief over  
this choice already made.

*No, none, nothing* all  
the time, kept in line,  
the wanting is failure.

You are object. Man-made  
beauty ends the pure  
prime of hunger.

Curio

Who is shattering shadows  
in her little kitchen?

The voice quiet now  
and the garden says something  
about being right after all.

## Night Garden

I look behind the willow and witch hazel,  
choose to have a picnic on my own.  
There's a feast of nothing.

Carrots cut the size of fingertips  
in a white bowl that represents my prayer.  
My mind blooms in its repetition.

I fade into the garden, a hyacinth shriveling  
in its place, it tastes only sacrifice.  
I count the minutes of a meal  
that feels like worship.

I touch the white cloth napkin to corners  
of my closed mouth, wish for wings.

Curio

Come, we'll just keep  
it in a little jar  
still glistening.

I clung like a glass ladybug  
to light and sparkle.

*That is all* she said  
to herself.

Mirabilis

Give me a cilice,  
a set of whips, a bed  
of thorns. To hold this suffering,  
have it warm  
these cold hands. Taste  
my own breath,  
hollow heat of it  
in the back of this dry throat.  
To know God, see him  
in the outline  
of my broken body.

Hear him whisper  
as the wafer sticks to tongue.  
Ecstasy of forgetting  
flesh, any  
want lifts  
like a prayer.  
Now I shed  
self like a robe only my  
skin knows.  
In this garden,  
pain grows into light,  
into luscious  
absence.

## One Way to Feel

This truth is not water, it's ice.  
Words that fall from my head  
to my lips in a spill I can not lap up.  
Outdoors, on a winter night I told

a friend worried for my warmth  
*I don't really feel much.* Ask me  
now—I might say I've been practicing.  
The niceties of normalcy fade.

When I fan out, face down, the Tarot  
cards of my mind, I choose the Fool  
every time. Feather-haired and frantic,  
I make my near-step to the oblivion.

Still, the thrill of risking my body beckons  
in quiet ways. Sometimes, I walk  
as it's getting dark just so I can see  
the path disappear before my eyes.

Curio

Those nighttime walks  
I continued the story  
about girls finding  
the answer.

*There's no such thing*  
she said.

Woman with Stone Skirt

I count so my mind  
can catch numbers instead of itself.

Nine strokes of the brush on that worn wall,  
Sixteen blue bottles line the bathroom sill.  
In the box garden, seven rows of begonia.  
I count it all like beads on a rosary.

I make madness.  
String my room  
with its little bright lights  
keeping the world out.  
When I tally up  
the food on my plate  
all I see is a number. It equals me.  
It is black and sharp and endless.

I have tried the trick  
where my mind forgets  
its body. Now, I try  
the one where my mind  
forgets itself.

## Silhouette

I like these lies I tell.  
They cut away the person  
I wish I could forget to be.  
I am new in black and white paper.  
I vanish into walls through these hallways.  
Only the outline of a person  
placed against the surface of some life.

One by one, I close the doors  
over and over until the hollow sound  
drowns itself out. I rub my arms and legs  
along the velvet sofa  
to make them melt away—a lust for softness  
as my body becomes  
all angle and bone.

I might stay awhile here—  
in the in-between. A forgotten piece of art  
remembering itself before it disappears.

## Bird Girl

Come closer, I will tell you  
the rose window holds a face from time to time  
that isn't mine—but looks like I used to.

It is quiet here so close to the breath of barely.  
I almost forget that I used to be more.  
I am kept by the magic I make. A flick of wrist  
or bend of back and I am floating towards shadow.

She grows wings full and feathered, a splendid  
shade of peculiar. These bird bones most elegant  
so close to moonlight. Head tilts to see—  
is that rustling just a wing or whisper?

Curio

From the trees behind,  
I am still closed  
like one wicked dream.  
*Who else is here?*

I break.

Want As a Tiny Bird Sculpture

At my lightest—and losing,  
a candle shrinking down to its wick,  
I ate from a shiny china plate  
all the things I imagined I could.

My mind made me comfortable in some back room.  
All want molded meticulous, neat, enclosed—  
boxed object a thing of beauty.  
The tiny bird sculpture placed inside.

How lovely it looks, kept—  
fashioned feathers and black bead eyes.  
You can look and look  
until those silent pools reflect nothing.

Curio

I trick summer,  
rub a leaf  
on the pleat of skirt.

The voice sounds  
among little rooms.  
A black handkerchief  
folded the distant trees.

Girl in Bee Dress (II)

I wander through the garden  
in a blindfold  
to test myself.  
I am my own magician.  
I feel my way along the row—  
long dress buzzing against my bones

Toward My Blue Peninsula (II)

When I was a girl, there were dolls  
given old-fashioned names—Cassandra, Jillian, Emaline, Alice.  
The were dressed and fed, sweetly spoken to.  
*There, there Abigail, your mommy is here.*  
Perfect plastic containers to hold what I wanted.

Teacups, thimbles, coins—all the ways to dull  
the hook that catches me again and again.  
My mind is a loop of need.  
It wants to stop but doesn't know how.  
Beautiful box of objects or body of bones,  
how to sing a brain its lullaby.

Curio

I stretch out in the open air,  
the chrysanthemums blaze.

Light off the blade of a wind chime.

## Queen of Cups

You see, there is no choice.  
I can plant all these fertile words,  
pull them out by the root and start again.  
Nothing will make my mind another.

I know it now.  
This mind's whispers and wailings,  
the way it craves—its hooks in me.  
But hooks can hold beyond what will hollow.

I start to tell it like a tale.  
A tale removed from the teller.  
*The mind makes the body its messenger.*  
Do you listen?

## The Other Girl

The trick is to understand  
how to separate into two  
without the magic box

and the long cardboard knife.  
Here like this, one minute—  
and then suddenly not

the next. I slipped out of myself.  
One of me shrinking away  
in order to let the other act

the lead part, a practice of playing  
the understudy to myself.  
No way to avoid the glare

of her stare as she peels away  
the faulty layers of my story  
with her eyes. In the funhouse

mirrors I see only more and more  
of her hidden in dozens of glass  
facets. I'm small, then smaller,

a real-life Alice drinking herself away.  
She breathes to live nowhere,  
to vanish slowly into thin air.

I feel myself creeping cautiously  
about her, see a trace of my face  
behind hers. For years, I tap on the glass,

whisper words of wasted regret,  
feel each bone and my own numb  
skin—will myself back to the living.

## Notes

“Girl in Bee Dress”, “Woman in Stone Skirt” and “Philosopher’s Daughter” take their titles from works by artist Maggie Taylor.

“Toward My Blue Peninsula” adapts the title “Toward the Blue Peninsula” by Joseph Cornell.

“Still Life with Toy” references the painting entitled *Desire and Denial (Still Life w/Toy and Photo)*, 2010 by Gerry Perrino.

“Leaves, Blades, Cupboards” references a quote by Frida Kahlo, “Leaves. Blades. Cupboards. Sparrow. I sell it all for nothing. I do not believe in illusion”.

The “Curio” poems are erasures of parts of *Behind the Attic Wall*, a novel by Sylvia Cassedy.

“Mirabilis” takes its title from the term *Anorexia Mirabilis* which literally means “miraculous loss of appetite”. It refers almost exclusively to women and girls of the Middle Ages, who would starve themselves, sometimes to the point of death, in the name of God.

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