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March 2023

### Into the Woods and Over the Edge: New Ways to Write Critically & Creatively Through Mythopoetics

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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#### Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "Into the Woods and Over the Edge: New Ways to Write Critically & Creatively Through Mythopoetics" (2023). *Workshop Handouts*. 8.  
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# Into the Woods and Over the Edge: New Ways to Write Critically & Creatively Through Mythopoeitics

## What is Myth?

I'm using myth to denote any dominant culture narrative (Roland Barthes' definition) and stereotype that functions as a symbolic tool of social consolidation.

“Myth is a story that, regardless of its loose ends, states cultural agreement and coherence”  
– Rachel Blau DuPlessis

“Myth refers to social reality, to the rites and institutions of society, and hence the truth of a myth consists in its symbolic representation of social rites” – David Didney

The function of myth is hegemonic in reinforcing dominant cultural institutions and ideologies through explicit and implicit messages contained in prevalent cultural stories and stereotypes. In other words, myths are transmitted and reinforced by the hegemony (the social institutions -- e.g. everything from the ways in which the economy is set up to the institutions of marriage, education, healthcare etc. -- that reinforce a culture's overall values). For example, our market economy is built on the myth of Horatio Alger, Bill Clinton or Mark Zuckerberg (founder of Facebook), that anyone can go from rags to riches, and by extension, anyone down on his/her luck is probably to blame. These are broad examples: within subcultures and various communities, the dominant cultural narrative can be and often is very different.

## Three Points To Consider

**Point 1: Myths are slippery:** Myths morph and mutate over time, according to the values and needs of a culture, and particularly, of those in power. For example, there are over 500 variants of the Cinderella story, going back to ancient China in which a member of the royalty is stripped of her god-given royal status, forced to live in rags, and then manages to regain her power. In our culture, the Cinderella story focuses not on riches to rags to riches, but simply on rags to riches, reinforcing the American dream. Even supposedly authoritarian versions of important historic stories with mythic qualities (such as the Exodus in the Old Testament, or the Last Supper in the new one) are questionable. Riane Eisler in *The Chalice and the Blade* found that three groups of Hebrew priests over several generations revised biblical stories so that common version today is “a patching process.”

**Point 2: Myths Hook Into the Universal and Historical Simultaneously:** It's a paradox, but myths both link us to the universal -- some overarching idea that seems to transcend a particular culture and people and thus seems to apply to all cultures and peoples -- and the historical -- the values, power structure and hegemony of a particular culture -- simultaneously. For example, it's a common belief in America that a person can change her life circumstances through hard work, playing by the rules and accumulating wealth - - e.g., we're based on a market economy, yet in many American tribal cultures, the way to live successfully is put community and clan first and show wealth by what a person can give to others -- e.g. a gift economy. A great source on this is Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*. Myths tell us who we are, where we come from, how we are to live, what we are, and they do this most effectively by acting as if what they say is the essence of human nature.

“Of all our stories, myths are considered the most universal, describing deep structures of human need and evincing the most cunning knowledge of ‘mankind’” – DuPlessis

Myth is at once based on denial history, transforming “history into nature,” and is born of history, “for myth is a type of speech chosen by history” – Roland Barthes.

### **Point 1 + 2 = point 3: What Myths Survive and Thrive Have Everything To Do With the Power**

**Dynamics in a Culture:** Those in power in a culture are the ones who often benefit the most from reinforcing that culture's myths. For example, we see the myth of the American dream at work in the film *The Social Network*, which reinforces both how anyone can go from middle-class to crazy-rich and how being innovative, breaking the rules while reinforcing the rules, can bring success.

## **Where is Myth?**

**We can find myths any direction we look:** Greco-roman myths, fairy tales, folk tales, biblical stories, and contemporary cultural myths and stereotypes. The stories we tell and retell the most tell and retell of our culture's deepest and more prevalent values. For example, we all know the tale of "Hansel and Gretel" in which two innocent children are abandoned by their well-meaning and weak father because of a wicked step-mother, and they must survive by pushing another embodiment of evil -- the witch -- into the oven. Yet few of us know about "Molly Whupple," in which a plucky young orphan tricks a giant, kills and beheads him, and steals all his wealth.

## **Mythopoeitics: What's Poetry Got To Do With It?**

Poetry and myth come from the same place: using language to create something out of time, larger than time and place, more enduring – both rely on the magical qualities of language to evoke through poetic devices (rhyme, rhythm, assonance and alliteration, repetition, etc.).

One is a container for language; one is a container for what language does – shape and interpret and reinforce and unearth reality.

- Both are the fastest trains beyond ordinary sight, ordinary speech, ordinary knowing.
- Both are ways of knowing unto themselves – each reinforces, creates even, a kind of epistemology.
- Both are time capsules of cultural DNA.
- Both are prone to permutations, revisions, deconstructions and reconstructions all the time.

**Mythopoeitics** is a blend of the words "myth" and "poetics," and it connotes how we use and can use literature and the oral tradition to convey, reinforce, question, subvert, throw out or create anew our dominant cultural narratives (to use Roland Barthes' definition of myth). This term comes from the Greek μυθοποιία, "myth-making," which is rooted back to the origins of the oral tradition, in which important cultural information on how to be in the world (identity, behavioral expectations, social structure, etc.) needed to be transmitted in a pre-written word form that could be easily transmitted over time and place. For this reason, much of our earliest known literature in the Western tradition -- such as *Beowulf* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* -- becomes easy to remember through literary devices such as alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds, especially first letter in a word), assonance (repetition of vowel sounds), repetition, strong rhythmic patterns, rhyme, etc. In the myths of many Indigenous traditions, we can also find strong use of literary devices for the same reason.

**Song and Myth** are also entwined (especially if you consider song's roots in poetry and visa-versa). Since literary devices make things easier to remember, it's no surprise that many cultures, including our own, use song especially to transmit cultural information since song combines strong rhythms, rhyme, repetition and other literary devices. Consider songs you've known all your life, and what they say about history, culture and identity.

**Mythopoeia**, another and older way of saying "Mythopoeics," connotes the creation of whole mythic worlds, such as the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Ursula LeGuin, William Blake, H.D., H.P. Lovecraft -- even the *Star Wars* films -- and many other writers and artists who evocate detailed worlds with their own well-developed histories, mythologies, settings and geographies, political and social systems. Tolkien even wrote a long poem, *Mythopoeia*, to convey his philosophy of creative myth-making

## Why Revisionary Mythopoeics?

Revisionary Mythopoeics is as old as the hills, as vast as the sky, and it basically means sees mythmaking with new perspective. If you look at any poetic trend, tradition and movement, you'll see revisionary mythopoeisis: The British Romantics were revising ways of looking at the world, understanding it and one's place in it through what they wrote and how they wrote (Keats, for example, value of sensual imagery after so-called Age of Enlightenment); Modernists were creating poetry that drew upon the poem as the thing, as a work of art independent of time and space, influenced by the isolation and alienation of early 1900's culture (Eliot: "That is not what I meant at all/ This is not it, at all" in "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"); the postmodernists, especially the deconstructionists and post-structuralists who went on to name genres such as language poetry were often concerned with slippery nature of language and meaning, an onion you could unpeel to nothing.

"Myth is a story that, regardless of its loose ends, states cultural agreement and coherence. Thus when a writer dissents from that agreement, or oscillates between being a member and a critic of her culture, she can turn to a myth because she can thereby attain a maximum tension with and maximum seduction by dominant stories." -- Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond Endings*

"A radical critique of literature, feminist in impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue of how we live, how we have been living, and how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name" -- and therefore life -- afresh. -- Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision"

"In the universe of the masculine paradigm I naturally absorbed ideas about women, sexuality, power from the subjectivity of male poets -- Yeats not the least among them. The dissonance between these images and the daily events of my own life demanded a constant footwork of fragmentation on identity: woman from poet. Every group that lives under the naming and image-making power of a dominant culture is at risk from this mental fragmentation and needs an art which can resist it." -- Adrienne Rich, *Poetry for the People*

## Venues for Revisionary Mythopoeics

**The bible:** great source because it's, well, the bible -- can use mythopoeisis to bring it to life in new ways or dismantle some of its more damaging interpretations. Judith Hall -- "Fragments of an Eve"

The blue spires of juniper, pine  
Pocked white:  
    : Waiting: Shouldn't I  
Wait: For the chill to give this cluttered  
Wind a shape: Like white tongues:  
    : Once rocks, roads: Cloud-color:  
        : Dig an H for *Hello*:

of hurt: or                    the echo of hurt:  
Ha ha:                    : So I spin: Abridged dances:  
                  : My body: Pearled in ice: Bead-whorls  
                  of hail singing in hair:  
As if I believe the dream that brags:  
You can do anything: Enter the world:  
(34)

**Fairy tales and folk tales:** Gets to basis of popular media mighty quick to find other ways to speak truths of real life experiences and understandings. Examples: what Disney does to Grimm tales, and what Grimm boys were doing in the first place. New ending: Olga Broumas's "Cinderella ends with this:

.....I am a woman in a state of siege, alone  
  
as one piece of laundry, strung on a windy clothesline a  
mile long. A woman co-opted by promises: the lure  
of a job, the ruse of a choice, a woman forced  
to bear witness, falsely  
against my kind, as each  
other sister was judged inadequate, bitchy, incompetent,  
jealous, too thin, too fat. I know what I know.  
What sweet bread I make  
for myself in this prosperous house  
is dirty, what good soup I boil turns  
in my mouth to mud. Give  
me my ashes. A cold stove, a cinder-block pillow, wet  
canvas shoes in my sisters', my sisters' hut. Or I swear  
  
I'll die young  
like those favored before me, hand-picked each one  
for her joyful heart.  
(Mieder 85-86)

**Greco-roman tales:** also relates to basis of cultural understandings – the Penelope waiting for her man, the Zeus who basically rapes without consequences (even his twin sister, Hera – “fucks all of mythology into existence,” says Stan Lombardo), the Circe who is shunned and feared because she lives alone and quick eccentrically (plus all those dogs). Can reclaim these women -- “The Muse as Medusa” by May Sarton:

I turn your face around! It is my face.  
That frozen rage is what I must explore –  
Oh secret, self-enclosed and ravaged place!  
This is the gift I thank Medusa for.” (STL 215)

**Silenced or unsung mythologies:** Pre-patriarchal mythologies, mythologies of other cultures –

### **Magic Words**

In the very earliest time,  
when both people and animals lived on earth,  
a person could become an animal if he wanted to

and an animal could become a human being.  
Sometimes they were people  
and sometimes animals  
and there was no difference.  
All spoke the same language.  
That was the time when words were like magic.  
The human mind had mysterious powers.  
A word spoken by chance  
might have strange consequences.  
It would suddenly come alive  
and what people wanted to happen could happen –  
all you had to do was say it.  
Nobody could explain this:  
That's the way it was.

-- Translated from the Inuit by Edward Field

**Contemporary myths & symbols:** Look all around you to find many examples of myths or mythic stereotypes, such as how men or women your age, ethnicity, background, etc. are supposed to be. For example, Sharon Olds challenges several myths in this poem about creativity, creation and procreation, how functions of the body and childbirth should not be discussed, and women's power:

#### The Language of the Brag

I have wanted excellence in the knife-throw,  
I have wanted to use my exceptionally strong and accurate arms  
and my straight posture and quick electric muscles  
to achieve something at the centre of a crowd,  
the blade piercing the bark deep,  
the haft slowly and heavily vibrating like the cock.  
I have wanted some epic use for my excellent body,  
some heroism, some American achievement  
beyond the ordinary for my extraordinary self,  
magnetic and tensile, I have stood by the sandlot  
and watched the boys play.  
I have wanted courage, I have thought about fire  
and the crossing of waterfalls, I have dragged around  
my belly big with cowardice and safely,  
my stool black with iron pills,  
my huge breasts oozing mucus,  
my legs swelling, my hands swelling,  
my face swelling and darkening, my hair  
falling out, my inner sex  
stabbed again and again with terrible pain like a knife.  
I have lain down.  
I have lain down and sweated and shaken  
and passed blood and feces and water and  
slowly alone in the centre of a circle I have  
passed the new person out  
and they have lifted the new person free of the act  
and wiped the new person free of that  
language of blood like praise all over the body.

I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman,  
Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing,  
I and the other women this exceptional  
act with the exceptional heroic body,  
this giving birth, this glistening verb,  
and I am putting my proud American boast  
right here with the others.

## Four Circles of Story In Your Life

You have four circles of dominant narratives, telling you who you are:

- The outer circle is the cultural story about who you are as a person of a specific background, ethnicity, class, grouping of experience, gender, ability, age, region, etc.
- The next circle is in the community story of who you are: a story identifying you and defining your role according to the geographic or other community in which you live, work and play (such as a community of friends you're in touch with for years, the gang at the office, etc.).
- The next circle in is the family story of you are -- as defined by both your current family (however you've created and evolved into that) and your family of origin -- seeing you often a certain role (or several roles), such as peacemaker, black sheep, wild one, etc.
- Finally, at the very center is the circle you've drawn around yourself of who you see yourself as, what you take on as your story from the stories given to you, the stories you've lived and created. For example, you might see yourself as a survivor, a lost soul trying to find peace, a crazy kid who always lands on her feet, a scared puppy who knows how to work like a dog, etc.

In the center of the circles is you as you are in the here and now: whatever your essence is beyond and beneath the storylines. Consider this:

"We cannot be present and run our story-line at the same time." -- Pema Chodron

## Benefits of Revisionary Mythopoeitics for Goddard Students

1) Make visible the invisible – give power to the powerless – name the unnamed – and in short, claim other ways of knowing than the ones favored by contemporary market-economy society. It can bring out the personal, the subjective, the non-linear, etc. toward service of new ways of knowing (breaking the societal myth that “we just need to not get too emotional about this and really use our heads here” – privileging head over heart, privileging dividing the body and heart and mind instead of living integrated). *Revisionary mythopoeitics allows you to create and make visible a new world/way of seeing the world.*

2) Challenge power structures by going to the roots of the dominant cultural narratives that help support these structures, outline and highlight and spotlight the ways in which big, obscure hegemony effects individuals, local culture, the earth, etc. in specific ways – and in turn – start taking apart the mythic hold. *Revisionary mythopoeitics helps you subvert, change, and dismantle current damaging myths.*

3) If it's a truly liberated revisionary mythopoesis, and not just another way of creating its own solidification and consolidation (i.e. radical conformists) – as an act or series of acts that serves as individual makings of individual myths, thereby breaking the hold of collective, fixed and universal myths – or, who knows, take us toward some real universal. *Revisionary mythopoeitics takes us beyond limited definitions of myth that homogenize individuals and local cultures into a global marketplace.*

## How to Do Revisionary Mythopoeitics

- 1) Write creativity and critically in ways that delegitimize or displace patriarchal or hegemonic myths by bringing in other voices, writing beyond endings or before beginnings, or altering other cores of the myth.
- 2) Integrate other previously ignored mythologies into mainstream literature.
- 3) Create new mythologies based on wider ways of knowing.

Here are some approaches and techniques for critical and creative writing, but note that these are largely interchangeable. You can subvert the myth of critical writing being soulless scholarly dribble without a voices, for example, by employing creative writing. You can bring critical perspective to creative writing too.

### *Creative Writing Techniques & Approaches:*

- **Steal the Language** and make it your own by changing tone, mixing syntax or various dictions to highlight using patriarchal language, create way of speaking that's tied into other ways of knowing than dominant ones. Postmodern technique to play with syntax and diction to draw attention to what we expect of our language and poetry, of our myths too. The colloquial phrasing of Alta, Margaret Atwood, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Sharon Olds, according to poet/scholar Alicia Ostriker, "not only modernizes what is ancient, making us see the contemporary relevance of the past. It also reduces the verbal glow that we are trained to associate with mystic material (236). To invent a new language is not possible, but neither is it possible to use the old language without drawing attention to its limitations in exposing myths and articulating the self.
- **Narrative Coherence:** take apart or recreate basic plot by recasting ending, changing sequence of narrative, or redistributing weight of certain elements of the narrative. You can do this by writing from the perspective of before the well-known myth begins (e.g. the queen's difficult childhood that led her to be so mean to Snow White), or after the standard story ends (e.g. Dinah's story in *The Red Tent*), or focus on another aspect of the story (e.g. give more weight to Hagar's experience in the biblical story of Moses casting her and their son Ishmael to the desert).
- **Change spatial or temporal setting** to show direct impact ancient myth has on contemporary culture. Take a story from Hmong traditions and place it in contemporary American culture to show the value of this story for today's Hmong population, or move an ocean-front, palace-view story -- such as Hans Christian Anderson's "The Little Mermaid" -- to a low-income, American urban neighborhood to show silencing of women.
- **Change point-of-view**, let silenced one speak – H.D.'s "Eurydice":

I have the fervour of myself for a presence  
and my own spirit for light;

and my spirit with its loss  
knows this;  
though small against the black,  
small against the formless rocks,  
hell must break before I am lost;

before I am lost,  
hell must open like a red rose  
for the dead to pass. (55)



- **Employ multiple voices** to challenge dominant way myths are conveyed in our culture. For example, you can write something from several perspectives, or as a dialogue or play. A poem could, in one stanza, express one perspective, and in another, express another; a dialogue can bring together many voices. You can even divide up the self into multiple perspectives, such as "The Good Girl," "The Wild Woman," "The Scholarly Sneak," "The Lazy Lemming," etc.
- **Use old skins for new life** -- you can voice personal and family and local communal myths through using traditional forms, such as -- in poetry -- sonnets, villanelles, the epic; in playwriting -- the one-act sketch, the romantic-comedy that ends in marriage, the tragedy and ends in death. Mary Swander's book *Driving the Body Back* is an epic poem focused on the speaker seeking self-knowledge by journeying back through major influences of her life while also driving the body of a dead family member with her cousin across Iowa for burial. She creates poetic monologues on the lives of family members to show their legacy, and declares, "I say I've seen scenery."
- **Make the writing itself the experience** – the myth enacted between writer and reader: Rich herself said:

"Instead of poems *about* experiences I am (now) getting poems that are experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even as they reflect and assimilate it. In my earlier poems, I told you, as precisely and as eloquently as I knew how, about something; in the more recent poems something is happening, something has happened to me and, if I have been a good parent to the poem, something will happen to you who read it." -- Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*

Then making myth, making poetry extends to reader not just as pleasant or interesting or jarring experience of reading a poem, but of the poem as a kind of time capsule that releases new seeds for seeing the world, for seeing ourselves in us. Poem can then do what myth does: stick to us because it's relevant to our time, our values, our concerns, our fears and desires, our lives just as certain myths stick to certain time periods and places because of what they reinforce. Poem can function as myth – show us who we are, how we can live, where we come from, what possibilities – wider than the myths we grew up with – await us if we summon up the courage to make our own mythology in our art and in our lives.

### ***Critical Writing Techniques & Approaches:***

- **Mix genres:** By blending prose, poetry, letter-writing, dialogue and other genres, you can re-arrange how research is presented and your own authority (your own voice, ideas, responses, questions). In mixing genres, you also show how sometimes one can get closer to the truth by speaking in different forms. For example, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Susan Griffin are famous for critical writing that's often compared to a collage or patishe, mixing together quotes, responses, snippets from their journals, bits of poetry, overheard dialogue, etc.
- **Write in a chorus instead of one voice:** You can also show various angles of inquiry, different ways to approach questions and answers in a piece of critical writing by bringing in different voices through writing your essay as a short play or as letters written between various perspectives.
- **Make the essay itself creative writing:** You can write an essay as a series of letter, a play, a series of sonnets, a short story, or series of prose poems that incorporate into their text quotes and paraphrased information (with citations of course), your responses and questions, larger ramifications and insights, and explorations of meaning.
- **Write in a mythic voice:** One way to show the mythopoetic qualities of a topic is to write from the perspective of a mythic figure. What if Lilith, Rapunzel, Snow White, Peter Pan or the Little Match Girl narrated your essay? What would be revealed by showing the perspective of mythic figures who are especially silenced or marginalized?
- **Use a fairy tale, folktale, biblical story or contemporary myth to frame your essay:** Even if

you're not writing specifically about mythopoetics per se, you can bring in a myth to show the mythic dimensions of your topic. For example, an essay about women's silences might lend itself well to excerpts from Hans Christian Anderson's "Sister of the Seven Swans" (or one of hundreds of other myths in which women trade their voices to save a loved one). An essay on poverty in a American might do well to bring in examples from, or even follow the storyline, of an American dream myth, such as the rise of Bill Clinton or Mark Zuckerberg or Horatio Alger. Writing about racism in American politics? You might find good material by looking at cultural myths floating around about Barack Obama (e.g. that he's not born in America).

- **Consider how a popular myth needs to be changed, subverted, thrown out or created anew:** You can find your critical essay by looking at some popular myth, and then deconstructing it (e.g. the myth that women should look at teenage boys with breast implants and mega lips), or throwing it away (e.g. the myth that women shouldn't show certain emotions), or creating something anew (e.g. transforming a myth of the American dream into one based on helping people discover their communal dream).

## Writing Exercises and Resources

*Stories heal us because we become whole through them. In the process of writing, of discovering our story, we restore those parts of ourselves that have been scattered, hidden, suppressed, denied, distorted, forbidden, and we come to understand that stories heal. As in the word remember, we re-member, we bring together the parts, we integrate that which has been alienated or separated out, revalue what has been disdained. In other words, self-discovery is more than gathering information about oneself. The gathering, the coming to know, has consequences. It alters us. We re-store, re-member, re-vitalize, re-juvenate, rescue, re-cover, re-claim, re-new. Writing our story takes us back to some moment of origin when everything was whole, when we were whole. It takes us back to the moment, in kabbalistic lore, before the world-vessel was shattered and the divine sparks scattered helter-skelter. We are like that broken vessel, and story has the possibility – becomes one of those deeds, tikkun olam – of gathering us up again.*

-- Deena Metzger, *Writing for Your Life*

### ***Journal Writing Exercises:***

1. Become a character of the tale and tell your side of the story (what "really" happened). Speak from the point-of-view of the wicked step-mother, the sky, the teapot, the cat sleeping on the porch, the Greek columns in the temple, the crow. Don't censor yourself.
2. Take the plot of the story and set it in your everyday life, giving various character parts to various people (or other species) in your life and/or imagination. For instance, you could cast Psyche and Eros, or Briar rabbit, or the Rose Red as people or forces in your life, and see what happens.
3. Write beyond the end of the story--what happens after the last line you read. How do Hansel and Gretel and their foolish father live after their reunion? What happens to Cinderella after hanging out with the prince for 40 years? Go into the future and find out.
4. Or write a pre-quel to the story, a story before the story that helps us understand the reasons characters developed such strange drives toward doing evil or being good. Tell how the sea-witch of "The Little Mermaid" grew up. Explore the inner life of Bluebeard as an infant.
5. Imagine that a story contains some magic answer to an ongoing problem or challenge in your life, and then write that story. Close your eyes, and guide yourself through the story, paying special attention to small things – the objects in a kitchen, the flowers blooming outside a cottage, the gesture of the prince's

father, etc. Search for a moment, a gesture, an object or something else that could potentially hold special magic for your life, and then take that into a story about a difficult situation in your own life.

6. Write your own folktale set now or then or whenever. You have endless options, including:
  - a. Write about the origin of something (paper clips, clouds, salamanders, kisses, etc.);
  - b. Write a trickster story in which some animal (coyotes are standard, but hey, you can have a trickster marmoset too) plays an instrumental role in tricking or tossing someone back to his/her essential self;
  - c. Take an ordinary event in your life, and folktale it. Tell about this event as if you are a god or goddess, or an animal, or a spirit narrating what happened and what it meant.
  - d. So many Western folk tales involve a young (and often female) underling with very little power getting, through no fault of his/her own, into terrible trouble, and then by virtue of his/her virtue, wit, luck, royal blood or some other factor, transforming him/herself out of the trouble. Go back in your life to a time when you felt you were in terrible trouble or when you suffered a great loss or were stuck in overwhelming fear. Write yourself as a child whose good heart helps him/her climb out of this difficult place.
  - e. Take a moment when something big changed in your life, and write it as a tale of transformation. Focus on what events and circumstances led up to this transformation, and how you were changed in the process.
  - f. Write a tale about desire or fear, creating characters that embody what struggles you might face with either or both desire or fear.

### ***Poetry Therapy Exercises:***

1. After reading Pablo Neruda's poem, take a phrase and use it as a jumping off point, such as "I did not know what to say..." or "my heart broken loose on the wind..." Or write about a time when something significant to your personal myth – your story about yourself – arrived, and how you recognized it.

#### **Poetry**

And it was at that age...Poetry arrived  
in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where  
it came from, from winter or a river.  
I don't know how or when,  
no, they were not voices, they were not  
words, nor silence,  
but from a street I was summoned,  
from the branches of night,  
abruptly from the others,  
among violent fires,  
or returning alone,  
there I was without a face  
and it touched me.

I did not know what to say, my mouth  
had no way  
with names  
my eyes were blind,  
and something started in my soul,  
fever or forgotten wings,  
and I made my way,  
deciphering

that fire,  
and I wrote the first faint line,  
faint, without substances, pure  
nonsense,  
pure wisdom  
of someone who knows nothing,  
and suddenly I saw

the heavens  
unfastened  
and open,  
planets,  
palpitating plantations,  
shadow perforated,  
riddled  
with arrows, fire and flowers,  
the winding night, the universe.

And I, infinitesimal being,  
drunk with the great starry  
void,  
likeness, image of  
mystery,  
felt myself a pure part  
of the abyss,  
I wheeled with the stars,  
my heart broken loose on the wind.

-- Pablo Neruda

Translated by Alastair Reid

2. Write a story or poem about how you survived something you didn't know you would survive. Look at what this writing tells you about your beliefs about your own strength and endurance, and how those beliefs have shifted.

### **Snowdrops**

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know  
what despair is; then  
winter should have meaning for you.

I did not expect to survive,  
earth suppressing me. I didn't expect  
to waken again, to feel  
in damp earth my body  
able to respond again, remembering  
after so long how to open again  
in the cold light  
of earliest spring –

afraid, yes, but among you again  
crying yes risk joy

in the raw wind of the new world.

-- Louise Gluck

3. Take any of the three points made in the second stanza, and write how you know this is or isn't true in your life.

### **Le Cri de Merlin**

It is winter, and you have come  
alone to a clearing in the wood.  
Close your eyes and imagine you are  
Merlin, shape-changer and androgyny,  
come to the forest Broceliande.  
So transformed in your inward being,  
slowly open your eyes and look at  
the clearing, circle of trees,  
snow and shadows, and then  
let all dissolve into turbulence  
of color and form, intense  
longing, and owl's cry.

If you follow these instructions,  
and if your heart is pure,  
you will experience three revelations.  
First is the knowledge  
that it has taken a lifetime  
to arrive at this place;  
second is the conviction  
that you are most alive  
in the act of discovery;  
and third is the fact  
that observation changes  
the thing observed.

Look! It is winter, and you have come  
alone to this clearing in the wood,  
a familiar place you have never  
seen before. Do not hurry to leave,  
but when at last you turn away,  
remember this, if you remember nothing else:  
You are no longer who you were.

-- Robert Collen

4. After reading this poem by Dick Laurie (you can see it on film at the end of "Smoke Signals"), write about how we forgive our fathers or mothers, children or lovers. Write in the collective, and see what comes to you.

How do we forgive our fathers, maybe in a dream?  
Do we forgive our fathers for leaving us too often or forever when we were little,

maybe for scaring us with unexpected rage or making us nervous  
because there never seemed to be any rage at all there?  
Do we forgive our fathers for marrying or not marrying our mothers,  
for divorcing or not divorcing our mothers?  
And shall we forgive them for their excesses of warmth or coldness?  
Shall we forgive them for pushing or leaning or shutting doors  
or speaking through walls or never speaking or never being silent?  
Do we forgive our fathers in our age or theirs,  
or in their deaths, saying it to them or not saying it?  
If we forgive our fathers what is left?  
-- Dick Laurie

5. Write your own initiation song for something you are to begin. Be lavish and specific.

### **Initiation Song from the Finder's Lodge**

Please bring strange things.  
Please come bringing new things.  
Let very old things come into your hands.  
Let what you do not know come into your eyes.  
Let desert sand harden your feet.  
Let the arch of your feet be the mountains.  
Let the paths of your fingertips be your maps  
and the ways you go be the lines on your palms.  
Let there be deep snow in your inbreathing  
and your outbreath be the shining of ice.  
May your mouth contain the shapes of strange words.  
May you smell food cooking you have not eaten.  
May the spring of a foreign river be your navel.  
May your soul be at home where there are no houses.  
Walk carefully, well loved one,  
walk mindfully, well loved one,  
walk fearlessly, well loved one.  
Return with us, return to us,  
be always coming home.  
-- Ursula LeGuin

6. Create your own new story of your life. Write first what it is not, and then elaborate on what it is.

### **The New Story of Your Life**

Say you finally invented a new story  
of your life. It is not a story of your defeat  
or of your importance and powerlessness  
before the large forces of wind and accident.  
It is not the sad story of your mother's death  
or of your abandoned childhood. It is not  
even a story that will win you the deep  
initial sympathies of the benevolent gods  
or the care of the generous, but it is a story  
that requires of you a large thrust

into the difficult life, a sense of plenitude  
entirely your own. Whatever the story is,  
it goes as it goes, and there are vicissitudes  
in it, gardens that need to be planted,  
skills sown, the long hard labors  
of prose and enduring love. Deep down  
in some long-encumbered self,  
it is the story you have been writing  
all of your life, where no Calypso holds you  
against your own willfulness,  
where you can rise  
from the bleak island of your old story  
and tread your way home.

-- Michael Blumenthal

7. Answer one of these questions by creating a myth to illustrate the answer: “What have the years written into your body?” or “What patterns emerged as you passed through fire?”

### **You There**

Put the palms of your hands together  
close to your body, thumbs touching your chest  
then bow your head to the tree  
whose body bears these words.

In the deep pool under the cedar  
a trout rises to a mayfly and ripples spread  
in widening O's like the years  
etched into heartwood as it grows.

What have the years written into your body?  
What patterns emerged as you passed through fire?  
Put your palms together, lifeline to lifeline.  
Bow your head for the history you bear.

-- Judith Barrington

8. After reading this Inuit poem/story, write your own piece entitled, “Magic Words” that focused on a time long ago when words were more alive, or a time far ahead.

### **Magic Words**

In the very earliest time,  
when both people and animals lived on earth,  
a person could become an animal if he wanted to  
and an animal could become a human being.  
Sometimes they were people  
and sometimes animals  
and there was no difference.  
All spoke the same language.  
That was the time when words were like magic.  
The human mind had mysterious powers.

A word spoken by chance  
might have strange consequences.  
It would suddenly come alive  
and what people wanted to happen could happen –  
all you had to do was say it.  
Nobody could explain this:  
That's the way it was.

-- Translated from the Inuit by Edward Field

9. Using a phrase, such as “I have made a footprint,” or another phrase, launch into what comes next, and then keep repeating the phrase so that it opens up all your words connected to it.

### **Planting Initiation Song**

I have made a footprint, a sacred one.  
I have made a footprint, through it the blades push upward.  
I have made a footprint, through it the blades radiate.  
I have made a footprint, over it the blades float in the wind.  
I have made a footprint, over it I bend the stalk to pluck the ears.  
I have made a footprint, over it the blossoms lie gray.  
I have made a footprint, smoke arises from my house.  
I have made a footprint, there is cheer in my house.  
I have made a footprint, I live in the light of day.

-- Osage Woman's Initiation Song

10. Using one phrase repetitively, tell a whole life story.

### **She Had Some Horses**

by Joy Harjo

She had some horses.

She had horses who were bodies of sand.  
She had horses who were maps drawn of blood.  
She had horses who were skins of ocean water.  
She had horses who were the blue air of sky.  
She had horses who were fur and teeth.  
She had horses who were clay and would break.  
She had horses who were splintered red cliff.

She had some horses.

She had horses with long, pointed breasts.  
She had horses with full, brown thighs.  
She had horses who laughed too much.  
She had horses who threw rocks at glass houses.  
She had horses who licked razor blades.

She had some horses.



She had horses who danced in their mothers' arms.  
She had horses who thought they were the sun and their  
bodies shone and burned like stars.  
She had horses who waltzed nightly on the moon.  
She had horses who were much too shy, and kept quiet  
in stalls of their own making.

She had some horses.

She had horses who liked Creek Stomp Dance songs.  
She had horses who cried in their beer.  
She had horses who spit at male queens who made  
them afraid of themselves.  
She had horses who said they weren't afraid.  
She had horses who lied.  
She had horses who told the truth, who were stripped  
bare of their tongues.

She had some horses.

She had horses who called themselves, "horse."  
She had horses who called themselves, "spirit," and kept  
their voices secret and to themselves.  
She had horses who had no names.  
She had horses who had books of names.

She had some horses.

She had horses who whispered in the dark, who were afraid to speak.  
She had horses who screamed out of fear of the silence, who  
carried knives to protect themselves from ghosts.  
She had horses who waited for destruction.  
She had horses who waited for resurrection.

She had some horses.

She had horses who got down on their knees for any savior.  
She had horses who thought their high prices had saved them.  
She had horses who tried to save her, who climbed in her  
bed at night and prayed as they raped her.

She had some horses.

She had some horses she loved.  
She had some horses she hated.

These were the same horses.

11. Li-Young Lee writes of the family stories -- the family myths that tell him who he is -- that haunt him, keep him awake but also tell him where he comes from. What is under your ancestral pillow?

## **Pillow**

There's nothing I can't find under there.  
Voices in the trees, the missing pages  
of the sea.

Everything but sleep.

And night is a river bridging  
the speaking and listening banks,

a fortress, undefended and inviolate.

There's nothing that won't fit under it:  
fountains clogged with mud and leaves,  
the houses of my childhood.

And night begins when my mother's fingers  
let go of the thread  
they've been tying and untying  
to touch toward our fraying story's hem.

Night is the shadow of my father's hands  
setting the clock for resurrection.

Or is it the clock unraveled, the numbers flown?

There's nothing that hasn't found home there:  
discarded wings, lost shoes, a broken alphabet.

Everything but sleep. And the night begins

with the first beheading  
of the jasmine, its captive fragrance  
rid at least of burial clothes.

-- Li-Young Lee

12. When you consider the story of your life, what do you want to remember?

### **You Reading This, Be Ready**

Starting here, what do you want to remember?  
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?  
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened  
sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world  
than the breathing respect that you carry  
wherever you go right now? Are you waiting  
for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this  
new glimpse that you found; carry into evening  
all that you want from this day. This interval you spent  
reading or hearing this, keep it for life –

What can anyone give you greater than now,  
starting here, right in this room, when you turn around  
-- William Stafford

12. Muriel Rukeyser ends her poem, "Kathe Kollwitz," with these lines:

What would happen in one woman told the truth about her life?  
The world would split open.

Write about what it would mean if one woman, or one man, told the truth about her/his life, and if that one woman or man is you.

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