THE QUEEN’S ENGLISH
Setting: The First World War. A Hospital on the Western Front. Speaker: A Nurse

“I smell smoke but see no fire,
A wooden joint creaks in a sleeve.
There is a hush, but in this forest,
So many limbs, and so few trees.

Since the peace went all to pieces,
We pile the pieces by the door.
But as Humpty Dumpty asked the King,
What else are men and horses for?

Because if a man’s for riding horses,
While a hand’s for writing letters,
What exactly do you use
To put an eggshell back together?

But what was broken to make omelets
Now scrambles in their hats.
If their body is a temple,
Then the belfry’s full of bats.

I write their letters for them,
Since they can’t control their diction.
To speak the Queen’s own English
Takes massive concentration.

I knelt beside a bedside,
And was rather decomposed,
I smelled a raw recruit
Going the way that all flesh goes.

He seemed to be all eyes,
They followed me across the room.
Then I saw his yellow belly,
His golden years had come too soon.

In the happy hunting ground
The sun was going south.
Since he couldn’t really speak,
I took the words out of his mouth:

‘I died for King and country
Gave my country for a horse
Put the horse before the wagon
Before the wagon left its course.

Of course these country matters
Matter more if you’re a King
And if you’ve nothing in the mattress
Then he’s got you on a string.

So I took the monarch’s shilling
And I took the Kaiser’s mark;
And now I’m only smelling
Denmark rotting in the dark.’

Then he turned as white as flour,
His eyes rolled into his head.
But the doughboy wasn’t rising,
And what he needed wasn’t bread.

He was shaking like a leaf,
So I covered him in glory.
His cold heart was a stone,
His ribcage was a quarry.

From this point on I knew
That Achilles couldn’t heal,
Nor could Ajax scrub the stains
From the sink of how I feel.

Sweat was streaming from his brow,
I sought a slick embrace,
As I bent to kiss Narcissus
I saw my own reflected face.

And I said, I love you darling
The way a Dutchman loves a dike,
The way a woman needs a man
That needs a fish that needs a bike.

So do my feelings justice
And put your finger on my scales,
Because I’m the Little Mermaid
And you’re the Prince of Wales.

Then he was quiet as a mouse;
I think the cat had got his tongue. 
Beneath the whiskers on his face 
A Cheshire smile was set in stone.

While sleeping with the fishes 
He looked so statuesque-
The strong and silent type  
Also need their beauty rest.

In his liver was a lily,  
In his pants a piece of cod. 
And so I laid him, gently,  
In a Marquee piece of sod.

So if your man loses his marbles,  
Get yourself a marble man.  
Erect him in your courtyard  
And let him court you if he can.”

©Mary Reid Kelley 2008
SADIE, THE SADDEST SADIST
SETTING: LONDON, 1915
CHARACTERS: SADIE, a Munitions Worker, and JACK, a Sailor

“We’ll all be hoarding sugar is the rumor that I heard. I can take a war, but rations! I call that a dirty word! In my mouth, the voice of reason, to my rear the German hordes, and I’d like to beat them both between a plowshare and a sword.

I want to be a Modern Girl! I don’t care if you approve! I’ll shake the bonds of servitude, and wear the cuffs of love! Goodbye, you land of bondage, I’m foot loose and fancy free. I’m going to make my money, honey, at the munitions factory!

I hopped upon a train, it took me to my training. I hoped to learn a trade, so I could be a traitor. I want to give the Huns a licking, and put their backs against the wall! I told my foreman how I felt and he said, “THAT’S CAPITAL!”

Then the boss said, “Now Sadie, on the factory floor, you’ll fill shells with shrapnel ‘cause that’s what they’re for. Take a good grip on the means of production, relax and just let your form follow its function.”

With the drill in my hands and my foot on the trestle, as nature intended, I was a natural! Like a bird in the nest, like square holes in round pegs, In a few fertile minutes, shells piled up like eggs. I do the work of two women, I’m a two for one deal, when my country addressed me then I deshabilled. I stay cloaked in mystery to keep my dress clean,
as the white Cliffs of Dover, as white as a screen.
And then, the shift was over, a change was under way.
I left the darkened factory for the dazzling light of day. My gaze fell on a sailor,
my head fell o’er my heels when he bent to pick it up, I felt a missionary zeal.

“Tell me your battle story,
for my passions are inflamed!
If the enemy’s sadistic
then I’ll beat him at his game!
I have a vision of invasion,
of desperate acts depraved!
And he said, ‘Calm down sweetheart,
Britannia rules the waves.’

“If I comprehend you
I read volumes in your eyes,
your structure is instructive,
I have your syntax memorized.
I’ve read the whole library,
since I’m verbally inclined,
I judge books under their covers
and I love the ones that rhyme!”

“You’re a sight for sore eyes and your laugh is infectious! Love’s in the air
and the feeling’s contagious! With a feverish pitch
you toss out the first ball, I’ll catch it, and keep it, Dear Jack, Warts and all.

I’m the machine
in your ship on the ocean,
This metaphor transfers
my surplus devotion.
As my figures of speech
adorn the gay science,
I entreat you to enter
a fluid alliance.

So swallow the pride
in your mouth or ignore it
Or give it to me,
because I’m gagging for it.
The stains on my sheets
will come out with some lemon,
I know that you care
by these Marx on my Lenin!
I awoke the next morning to the factory’s alarm
I had a pounding headache and an itch upon my arm.
It was a tiny badge of honor, and here’s a hundred more! My hands began to shake
and I collapsed upon the floor!
I have nothing left to give you but this horizontal sermon,
I’m at the mercy of these symptoms, and my foreman, and the Germans! I don’t want
Duetchland Uber Alles, because I’m an Anglophile,
but my Francophone is broken, it won’t be ringing for a while.”

“Don’t quit your labor, Sadie,
I’d be a band without a cymbal,
nothing to bang together
when my heart is all a-tremble!
I tell you my desires
and you stand there and reflect ‘em,
If my dreams are in the shitter,
it’s because you’ve gone and wrecked ‘em.

Sadie, if you’re a sadist,
you’re the saddest that I’ve seen,
for I’ve seen a Lot in Sodom
and what a jolly scene!
You can call my acts illegal,
but the law was made for fools,
I get away with murder
‘cause Britannia waved the rules.”

“So now I tell my story
to your retreating silhouette.
I’d throw the history book at you,
but it’s not written yet.
I would tell my tale of sorrow,
I would write my Magnum Opus,
but my tail’s between my legs
and I have Coitus Interruptus.

I want to be a Modern Girl, and I’m at the cutting edge, To say I don’t enjoy it,
that would be sacrilege.
I’ll lie back and think of England,
but it’s a mental trap;
I gave you my applause,
and you gave me the clap.”

©Mary Reid Kelley 2009
YOU MAKE ME ILIAD

Characters: A German Soldier, A German Medical Officer, A Belgian Prostitute
Scene: German-occupied Belgium, 1918

I can’t bear bloodshed with a shrug, like Atlas, But like that Titan, bordering on Madness;
I stand gridlocked in chartless territory
Mapping nausea with cartesian allegory.
I’ve lost perspective, and war’s lost tumescence; A sad deflation of my three dimensions.

But I’ll trade three for two, ‘cause paper’s better, It’s only graphic things are lines and letters;
A clear, enlightened script whose words are beacons, Because they’re typeset in the Font of reason.

I’d die right now if I were sure of waking In the pages of my classic in the making! An Epic, which I rhymed and wrote myself,
That’s filed right next to Homer on the shelf; Alphabetically, of course, my name is Humble, But read the text; the correlation’s ample!

I’ve reproduced the archetypes of drama: Every gesture is authentic, every comma, Pauses, as the Hero’s punctuated
By shrapnel that cruel fate had fated;
His deathbed speech takes up the 14th canto
Until his protege appeals to bright Apollo, Who hands him victory! Alas, it’s pyrrhic, But the description makes a moving lyric.
It’s got word count, action, sweat, and morals! But before I crown myself with laurels,

I sense a lack in my heroic tale:
The gaping presence of an absent detail. I can almost smell the glitch--
Can almost hear the rhyming enrich
The story’s thread! This dropped stitch will be found, And when I catch it, oh, I’ll verb that noun,
Wherever she may hide! And if she... She!
I’m missing women! Well, that solves the mystery.

You see, if you inject some threats and wheedles, Haystacks present the necessary needles.
And one must consider, when writing fiction, The literati’s Heroine addiction.

But girls are not my realm of expertise, I dread to tangle with the sex police.
If that’s experience, I’ll stay a Novice--
Recall, one glance from Helen skewered Paris! Her eyebrow was an Archer, her eye an Arrow;
Young Werther got the shaft, much to his sorrow. Will this goddess leave my hide intact?
More important, will she be exact
When she’s milked for facts? I bet you triple; The savage breast reveals a crooked nipple.

What the Greeks knew of poetry, drama, and rhetoric, They lacked in their knowledge of plain economics.
If their Bards had exalted demand and supply,
Their stockpile of concubines would have stayed high. They sieged Troy for ten years, and couldn’t prevail
Because they fought every night over two local females. The face that launched a thousand boats
Had just two lips and just one throat!
This neglect of logistics is too much to swallow! I gag when I think of this unbalanced Ratio!
But Brave little Belgium’s an organized land, We’ve got six Flemish girls in the palm of our hand!
In the palm of our hand is the fist of submission,
It fits like a glove cause the Germans Gott Mit Uns!
God’s with us, no doubt, but His holy protection
Is useless against a venereal infection!
His eye’s on the sparrow, it’s not on the germ; On behalf of our chemists, I’d like to confirm
This achievement of science, I couldn’t be prouder: Vaseline with bichloride of mercury powder!
A new antiseptic that’s straight from Berlin,
So line up, drop your trousers and Roll Back Your Foreskin! Roll back the foreskin, inspection is vital,
You know what could happen, I’ll spare the recital! Roll back the foreskin! Applying a dose of
This fragrant emulsion is slightly corrosive.
The sweet smell of progress, it singes your nostril
So roll back your foreskin and be a role model.
Were you born like that, Soldier? Well, that’s a surprise:
Roll back the foreskin unless you’ve been circumcised! Roll back the foreskin, and brace for the pain
As the ointment absorbs through the skin’s mucous membrane. Roll back the foreskin, each girl has a number,
Write it down on this card and above all, remember: Ten minutes with Venus, not one second
Moreskin, Count yourself fortunate, One, Two Three, Foreskin!

Stamped Monday, the Doctor’s bill of health— Unless the Hippocratic Oaf himself
Left a blemish on my record, I’m clean. Good line! I’ll put it in the second scene Upon the fortress ramparts —Herr Lieutenant,
Mach Schnell, you’re wasting your 10 minutes.

Your flesh is not of interest; I audition
Characters to boost my composition.
The verse needs local flavor to be edible, And as a tragic female, you’re most credible.

So writing’s in, and fucking’s out of fashion. Your reasons are your own, but I need rations! For 18 months, we’ve had no milk, no bread, Just soldiers, pencil necked and full of lead; Who wear me to the nub in drawn-out service. You scribes just utilize a different orifice.
So stick it in your ear! Bravo, Shakespeare—
Your language is as plain as mud is clear.
If you want bread and butter, then sing for your dinner! I’ll start the questions; Ich bin ein Beginner.
This one’s for my records, so don’t misconstrue:
Can you write? Can you read? Just how civilized are you?

I learned the Classics at my Father’s Knee,
He put verses in my mouth, which I’d mangle.
A forgetful, and a frigid prodigy,
Unable to express my Sturm and Drangle,
Which froze my jaw to such a great degree
It’s literary bent turned to an angle.

Your meaning is obscure, but far from dull, with tropes and symbols by the shovelful. It’s nice, but now that you’ve displayed
this facile talent, call a spade a spade.

But I’m a Whore for Metaphor;
I never Metonym I didn’t cherish or adore.
Hyperboles is my internal organ
That spans the hemoglobin, to hemorrhage clay;
Bursting grecian vessels full of Jargon,
The Unravished Bride of Quiet puts her insides on display.
Her visceral aesthetic oozes stature,
Her puddles build consensus on the floor,
Her fragrance charms the Dainty-er and Butch-er,
Who dye the Drapes to match the Carpet to match a new Spartan Decor.

A domain of great appeal for gutless wonders, Who tore their own vernacular asunder.
But their Idioms took refuge in my bowels, And as a woman of letters, I shit Vowels.

Not to be nosy, but I sniff ambition! Astounding! A poet with no pot to piss in! I find your abject condition a bonus,
Your readers will pity you, placing the onus
On them to unravel the twists of your colons
And syntax, and meter, the structure you’ve stolen
From our greatest poet; it’s not a misnomer,
He brings down the house, there’s no place like Homer!

Do you recall my home? It was en route,
Your army sacked it as I bawled my eyes out--
Quite helplessly-- but in this setting
I’m Alpha Female, and I’m Alpha Betting
That you can author, but can’t spell, disaster.
You’re slow to learn, which makes the clean up faster.

You can’t sterilize genius with Borax and soap, You belong, for posterity, under a microscope! Your culture deserves, not just verse, but a novel; It fascinates me on a cellular level!

I have procedures to prevent attachment: A fertile mind, a sterile instrument.
The first composes, and the last deletes, For my philosophy is Rinse, Repeat.
So pump me all you like for information; I’ll take my six percent saline solution
And flush away the species most invasive, Stop foreign matter from going native, Make home sweet home into a bitter dreg For the Refugees that trickle down my leg.

Spare them a drop of pity while you drip-- There’s room for stowaways on scholarship! #
Why should their search for synonyms be shorted, Terminated, ceased, annulled, aborted?
When the Gods bestow the gift of gab to each, And in their turn, they spew regurgitated speech?

At such Symposiums the smell bars thinking, They only serve what Socrates is drinking:
A Vomitorium’s eternal flow
that fills your mouth and molds your mind, like Plato.

And with all you’ve drank, it’s rather odd, You’re half a brain short of a Demigod! Excuse my Greek; you make me Iliad!

So rude! And so resentfully verbose;
My shrinking violet and her purple prose. Your grudge is vintage—harbor it with me! Those sour grapes will make a wine dark sea!
But who commands these boundless waterworks? Bottles, or their adversaries, Corks?
Surely Bacchus backs us in this crisis, For ere I see him, I smell Dionysus--
A reeking editor, swathed in fog.
He’ll condense your double digit monologue! See, round my legs the thick’ning plot coheres; A cloud infused with gothic atmosphere!

Sing, Muse! Your scribe has quill in hand!
I write, I rhyme, I breathe at your command. A plethora of stimuli congests
My page, and lodges in my throat and chest.

They blur my vision, which I now disown--
No more blind dates with fickle rods and cones! Yes, I reject the retinal without scruple;
Oh airborne Teacher, dilate your Pupil! Expand my windpipe, let me respirate
Your essence! Scribbling while Rome cremates
And rend’ring unto Seizure what I burn,
For from such Ashes, are reputations Urned.

But before the Ink dries on my palate, And my lungs fill with this fluid asset,
They must be bound and published unabridged
To help resuscitate my spitting image
With Mother Tongue, who’s coated with salvation; Her French technique of keeping Oral tradition
Exhumes the literary corpus of the past,
To kiss it’s parchment mouth; agape, aghast.

© Mary Reid Kelley, 2010