

Textile with Birds and Smoke

SAMPLE

ALSO BY KERI FINLAYSON

Rooms

SAMPLER

Keri Finlayson

Textile with
Birds and Smoke

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Shearsman Books

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CONTENTS

Prints	11
Tangled With Chirrup and Fruit	12
Hysteroplastic	13
Assisted Dying Debate: Atropos	17
Gulls	18
Factory Second	19
Bedspread 1984	21
Mitten Hands	23
Hero Dress	25
A Portrait	26
Fuzzy Felt	27
S/S A/W	28
Purkinje Silk Shift	29
Cold Water Swimmer	32
Becky Dorothy Scarlett	33
Opus Anglicanum	34
Writing Objects	36
Ding Dong Bell	38
Twenty Lambert and Butler	41
Book Scent	43
Galata Glass	45
The Storm Outside	46
Speaking About the Henge	47
Gossip	49
Plush	50
A History of Swanskin	51
Hemming	55
Boundary Layer	57
Things-out-of-Themselves	62
Assisted Dying Debate: Lachesis	63
Lambs and How They Live	65
Lambs: and how they live	66
Anchorhold	67
Assisted Dying Debate: Clotho	76
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	78

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For Alan, as always.

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As a teenager I was very ill. For five years, pain was something I balanced carefully and gently inside me. I read the few books of poetry I had, repeatedly, I sewed constantly. I listened to birds from my bedroom window and I thought about the things that flowed around the island of my bed. I had my final operation at seventeen. At eighteen I left for university to read theology. Though not a theist, isolation and pain had gifted a deep fascination with the contradictions of contemplative life.

The concerns that were born during these years have grown with me over a lifetime.

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Prints

A wire footed wren has been here.
It hooked a chain between the seams
then followed it. Look at the stitch:
light, cuneiform cuts in the snow.

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Tangled with chirrup and fruit

*On a breakneck of rocks
Tangled with chirrup and fruit,
Froth, flute, fin, and quill*

—Dylan Thomas

And in those years
it was always late November - bare
dove grey, then darker: woollen must and briefly surfacing light.
And in those years I pinned the days
with shapes of trees and mostly this one:
Wind smeared, toppling
with the toppling wall; a stagger and a yearn for the long horizon;
spined and hard with berries little more than stones made crimson with
a shine,
but mostly made soft with birds that changed the whole blurred thorny smear
to panicked song as I walked past to school.

I didn't have the words until I was fully grown.
The stones, the birds, the panicked spines,
I found them in a book which quietly had kept for me
that briefly surfacing shine: the long and lit horizon
of the calm and waiting line.

Hysteroplastic

Hysteroplasty: reconstructive surgery used to repair a malformed uterus where layers of stitches are used to create a normal shape.

Trapunto: a quilting technique using two layers, the underside of which is slit and padded producing a raised surface.

I have five scars
Three long slices
And a diagonal cut on the right side of my abdomen
with a nick above like the morning star

The pain arrived the second time I bled
twisting through a place
lower than my rumbling stomach lower
than nervous flutterings or queasy flips
through an inside I didn't know I had
I was thirteen

*I bought two metres of calico
a pad of polyester batting
and imagined myself a skirt
with a drop waisted panel
trapunto quilting – a thickened yoke
running from hip to hip.*

Thirteen, learning the mad extent
of my family's poverty
wrapping my gussets
with thin sheets

*I drew a double trail
interwoven lines centre bowed
to such complexity across the yoke
it took me days to figure the
clustered knot
that would dip below.*

of cloudy loo roll

'This is what it is,' men
with stethoscopes said
dry screams no tears
only new brand new vowels
cried below audibility

*a difficulty with button holes and
insertions
a zip is beyond impossible
how on earth do you stop a gape
when you have no means to measure?*

Fourteen; appendectomy
fifteen: removal of fallopian tube
sixteen: pain
seventeen: pain
seventeen: pain

*the weight of gathered fabric pulls
teenage hand stitching into
little frilled puckers dragging out
gaps so you might see my thigh
or my holed nylon tights. Sew tighter.*

Pain makes a new space:
a streak of grey prairie
under slow prickling
tv static sky
one day it turned inside out

*a light kapok ball all strands
all threads and air
thumb and finger rolls
I stuffed the over-under tracks
and sewed up the wispy slits.*

A new space:
a wand rubbed over cold gel
the inside out on a screen
and o! the faces
a room of white coats

*an irregular pentagon of thick quilting
from navel to ilium to pubis
holds up the whole world as a skirt
watch the raised lines run in
mad, mad looping.*

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The tailor's slice
showed a second, blind
blooded womb.

A cervix
snipped
his stitch
unfixed
the floor turned red

the weight of fabric pulled.

Tacking ripped
the surgeon threw the old bag on the floor
worked a rolled hem
embroidered it with woven lines
little looping mad-filled puckers
of fleshy threads and air.

The stitching in my centre
doesn't show
but o how long, how long now
I've known
how the weight
of gathered fabric pulls
the over-under knot
that's always there
the interwoven lines

of fleshy threads and air.

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Assisted Dying Debate

A pro-Atropos argument:

It is both dangerous and rude to snatch scissors.

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Gulls

We know them don't we

gulls.

Solid bodied, white. The beak a split scream.

Yelping us up a storm or a turned tip.

Seeding our sky like weeds.

They are not souls or prayers

but whole cathedrals of rage.

Feathered vaults, gathering all known sound and pitching it as noise
against the false horizon.

Our bodies are inadequately boned for such wrath.

Richly dense they lack the cavities for height.

We open our mouths and bleed long strands of gravity.

Our speech the opposite of flight.

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