

'Cottage in the Woods',
Alexei Kondratjewitsch
Sawrassow (1830-97).



A Toast to Scapegoats

Natalie DeVaul-Robichaud

Here's to you and the dark forest around you – darker still beyond the nearest trees. Here's to the promising gingerbread house and the woman welcoming you at the door.

Go on and stay for years. Recognise what is required and swallow what is given sweetly so you can grow the shame in your belly like a red gumdrop that lasts. *Here is what you will swallow: Here is what is not me but you and is dark secret shame in these hidden woods from my childhood.* Everyone she knows will hear of your wickedness. It's easy to tell a story about a child. Tell it and it will be true.

Go on and grow silent as your story becomes a syrup of her thoughts and yours. Learn to carry your wickedness: a mass of goat intestines across your shoulders, draped down your back like wet hair. Attempt to hide it under your jacket so the other women with affinities for gingerbread do not see. But the wet soaks through.

Know that the oven will prove the stories about you.

And remember that you are not alone even though it all happens to you alone and no one sees or hears or believes. (No one will help you either.) And the story she tells is that you are very very wicked – so if you believe you can bear it beyond the story's end, somehow someday you must leave, carrying the shame and horror of the oven and those screams and the clatter of the black iron door as you press back against her final frantic push.

Then go on into those dark woods where there are no gingerbread houses and the stories don't fade with the light and the memories go on because you can't ever be welcomed back now.

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Natalie DeVaul-Robichaud