# The Armless Maiden and

The Hero's Journey

by Midori Snyder

"Handless Maiden" by Jeanie Tomanek

In hero narratives, a young man leaves the familiar home of his birth and ventures into the unknown world where the fantastic waits to challenge him. Along the journey, his worth as a man and as a hero is tested. But when the trials are done, he returns home again in triumph, bringing to his society new–found knowledge, maturity and often a magical bride. The transformation of the young man into a responsible adult is sealed when the hero marries his magical bride and assumes kingship.

While no less heroic, how different are the journeys of young women. In folktales, the rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood is confirmed by marriage and the assumption of adult roles. In traditional exogamous societies, young women were required to leave forever the familiar home of their birth and become brides in foreign and sometimes faraway households. In the folktales, a young girl ventures or is turned out into the ambiguous world of the fantastic, knowing that she will never return home. Instead at the end of a perilous and solitary journey, she arrives at a new village or kingdom. There, disguised as a dirty–faced servant, a scullery maid, or a goose girl, she completes her initiation as an adult and, like her male counterpart, brings to her new community the gifts of knowledge, maturity, and fertility.

In the language of folktales, abstract ideas are represented by concrete and emotionally evocative images. Traditional storytellers use terrifying events to create the emotional experience of grief and abandonment, in which a young woman is not only set out on her journey away from home, but assured of the impossibility of ever returning. In the "Armless Maiden" narratives a girl is mutilated by a trusted family member and then thrust like a wounded animal into the forest. There can be no return to a childhood home corrupted by such cruel violence. The girl must move forward in her journey to a new destination where she will reconstruct not only her severed arms but her identity as an adult woman as well.

My first experience with the "Armless Maiden" was reading a powerful Xhosa version of the tale, "A Father Cuts Off His Daughter's Arms," performed by Mrs. Nongenile Masithatu Zenani, a Xhosa storyteller from South Africa, and translated by Harold Schueb. In this version a widowed father chooses not to remarry and relies on his young daughter to perform his wife's household duties of cooking and cleaning. When the girl reaches puberty, he attempts to coerce his daughter into filling the sexual role of his deceased wife as well. The girl steadfastly refuses his advances, bursting into noisy weeping that threatens to alert the neighbors. The next day the father takes her into the woods. Once again he demands that she have sex with him. When she again refuses, he cuts off her arms with a knife and leaves her in the woods to die. Bleeding and in tremendous pain, the girl suffers in solitude until hunger forces her to her feet. Dazed, she begins to wander through an "endless forest, ascending and descending."

Finally the armless girl reaches a walled homestead. Dropping to her knees, she crawls through a hole in the wall and rolls her body into the garden where she feeds like an animal on fallen corn and peaches. For three days, unable to stand without her arms, she rolls through the garden eating from the ground until servants discover her, mud–covered and filthy, and mistake her for a wild pig. They bring the dogs to attack her, but her cries stop them. The armless maiden is required to relate the story of her father's crime three times before she is rescued and brought into the homestead. Once bathed, the family realizes that even without her arms the girl is beautiful, and she is soon married to their son. At first this seems a resolution, particularly when she gives birth to a child, but gradually problems arise. Without her arms,

the new mother can not perform the expected domestic duties of a woman, and her in–laws begin to grumble. They want their son to take a second, more suitable wife, but he refuses. Eventually, the husband leaves for the city, looking for work, and his parents, pretending to be his wife, compose a letter stating she is pregnant again by a man other than her husband. The young woman, unaware of the forged letter, receives two replies. The first is from her husband demanding to know more about her unexpected pregnancy. A second letter arrives almost immediately after the first. This one is written by her father who, after learning of his daughter's survival, pretends to be the husband and threatens to burn her into ashes if she remains at home. The young woman and even her in–laws are sorely troubled by the threatening letter, and reluctantly they tie the baby on her back and allow her to leave the homestead.

The young woman returns to the woods and begins a second journey, ascending and descending the endless forest until, weary and thirsty, she comes upon a lake. As she bends awkwardly to drink, afraid her child may slip from her back and drown, a magic bird appears, and with a splash from each wing, restores her arms. Whole and able to do tasks for herself, the young mother jubilantly cares for her child: nursing the baby, bathing her, dressing her, pinching her until she cries and then comforting the child in the shelter of her newly restored arms. And when the woman is satisfied, she reties the baby on her back and returns, not to her husband's home, but to the neighbors. There she waits until her in–laws learn of her return and come to visit. Astonished by her transformation, they beg her forgiveness and desire only to write on her behalf to their son. But the young man is already on his way home, worried about his wife and child, convinced that something is terribly wrong. It takes a while, but slowly the tangled knot of forged letters is unraveled and the husband declares his love for his wife.

The "Armless Maiden" narrative stayed with me for many years and I found myself hunting down other versions, surprised at the ubiquity of this complicated and violent story. There were versions told all over the world such as "The Girl Without Hands" in Germany, "The Girl With Her Hands Cut Off" in France, "Olive" in Italy, "Dona Bernarda" in Spain, "The Armless Maiden" in Russia, "The Girl Without Arms" in Japan, "Rising Water, Talking Bird, and Weeping Tree" in French Louisiana, and many others. While some were less sexually threatening, most were every bit as gruesome as the Xhosa version: fathers and brothers hacking away the limbs of young girls, either in rage or in payment to the Devil. The girl would survive in the woods, sometimes comforted by the animals, indeed half–animal herself as she rooted for fallen corn or reached her neck to feed on the pears of the Prince's tree. Then there was the rescue as the Prince discovered the girl beneath the mud and matted hair and took pity on the beautiful face. And there would always be that complicated twist in the middle of the story, the exchange of forged letters that forces the armless woman back into nature where the final act of her initiation occurs.

It is a narrative with a strange hiccup in the middle. The brutality of the opening scene seems resolved as the armless maiden is rescued in a garden and then married to a compassionate young man or Prince. But she has not completed her journey of transformation from adolescence to adulthood. She is not whole, not the girl she was nor the woman she was meant to be. The narratives make it clear that without her arms, she is unable to fulfill her role as an adult. She can do nothing for herself, not even care for her own child. Through the exchange of forged letters, conflict is reintroduced into the narrative to send the girl back on her journey of initiation in the woods. There the fantastic heals her, purifies her in the waters of the lake and she returns reborn as a woman. Every narrative version concludes with what is in effect a second marriage. The woman, now whole, her arms restored by an act of magic, has become herself the magic bride, aligned with the creative power of nature. She does not return immediately to her husband but waits with her child in the forest or a neighboring homestead for him to find her. When he comes to propose marriage this second time, it is a marriage of equals, based on respect and not pity.

Although I believe that traditionally the "Armless Maiden" narratives are about female rites of passage to adulthood, within the story is the troubling echo of abuse. Male heroes may be impoverished or temporarily robbed of their royal birthrights, but rarely are they so vindictively mutilated before they are turned out into their journeys. Storytellers know well the constant underlying fear and threat of violence that surround the lives of women in their communities from childhood into adulthood. The exploitation of these terrifying images in the narrative may be extreme, but they are the dark threads pulled out of the fabric of our shared experiences as women. We are repulsed and angered by the brutal actions, not because such events could never happen, but because they frequently do. The fantastic emerges quickly in the story to magically soften the pain of mutilation, and move the audience away from the horror of the event and into the journey of self–discovery. Though the terror of the attack is short, as long as the girl remains mutilated we are reminded of the continuing painful isolation that such blows inflict. Survivors of abuse know that isolation well — whether as a child stripped of innocence among those still cloaked, or as an adult unable to bridge the fear of betrayal, and trust in the love of another.

It takes acts of self–determination and power to restore a sense of wholeness after abuse. In a Breton version of the "Armless Maiden," the heroine is mutilated by her brother in a thorn grove and speaks out against the crime with the calm assurance of a prophet. Armless and bleeding, she tells him that the thorn he is about to step on will be removed only by her hand. In that moment of intense pain and betrayal she is able to envision her life restored to wholeness. And what is more, she envisions her forgiveness of this terrible crime. The narrative is not about her survival as a victim, rather it is about her journey as a committed traveler fully aware of her destination.

The need for restoration and reconciliation are not the armless girl's alone in the versions employing the motif of the thorn grove. Abusers too are isolated by the shame and brutality of their violent acts. The brother in the thorn grove versions barely survives in the armless maiden's absence, his body imprisoned and pierced by a punishing vine of thorns that grows from the offending thorn in his heel. When the armless maiden returns to fulfill her prophecy, her transformation from a girl to a woman possessed of creative power is confirmed as she frees her brother from the prison of thorns with the touch of her restored hands. In so doing, she removes forever the corrupting taint of violence, allowing them both to continue in their new lives, unshackled by the past.

The armless maiden continues to haunt the imaginations of modern storytellers, but as something much more than a girl caught in a complex rite of passage to adulthood and marriage. She stands as an icon for the perils of change, the threat of violence that surrounds women's lives, and our own occasional resistance to undertaking the labor of transformation. Whether we chose it for ourselves or have it thrust upon us by circumstances, change demands both an act of undoing, a severing of the past, and an act of reaching, sometimes with little more than faith, for an imagined future. But this journey, composed of dangerous and destructive moments, speaks as eloquently about the real potential for failure and the threat of remaining permanently wounded. The exchange of forged letters denigrates the young mother's life and her creative achievements in the birth of her child. If she believes the letters, then she must accept her worthlessness and become an accomplice in her own dehumanization. If she capitulates to this outside voice of authority, if she forgoes the risks of transformation, she remains truncated, alienated from her true creative self.

In her poem Girl Without Hands, Margaret Atwood calls the reader to examine her own forgotten journey by the use of the second person voice. You are the modern professional woman walking to work unable, despite "the sunlight pouring over/ the seen world," to be part of the world. Instead, you remain enclosed in a circle "you have made, that clean circle/ of dead space you have made," believing yourself secure in this stagnant prison. Only the armless maiden can understand what it means for you to be so isolated, so out of touch from a full and authentic participation in life. But like the "you" of the poem, Atwood's armless maiden is a mutilated girl, a girl who has "Everything bled out of her" and who can only reach with "absent hands" to offer comfort. The poem evades the storyteller's promise of restoration, choosing to sympathize with those who have remained psychologically maimed.

"Sierra Leone, Fina, chopped by rebels,"
by Jenny Matthews

But without the final gift of restoration, only the brutal and numbing violence of the story remains. The shocking metaphor of mutilation in the tale erupted with savage reality in Sierra Leone's Civil War of the 1990s. A decade long war that killed over 50,000 people, displaced more than 500,000 refugees, and committed unspeakable atrocities on its people also produced a nation of armless maidens. The rebel armies of the RUF, many of them abducted child soldiers who were themselves traumatized victims, instigated a policy of mutilating civilians, even severing the hands and limbs of toddlers. Today, although the war is over and a commission for Truth and Reconciliation has been established to address these war crimes, the situation of women in Sierra Leone remains desperate at best. Poverty, illiteracy, and the shame associated with sexual assault and mutilation make it difficult to imagine a society restored to wholeness. And yet, there are glimpses of hope. The recent election of Ellen Johnson–Sirleaf as President of Liberia, a participant country in Sierra Leone's Civil War, (and the first woman president of Africa), argues the possibility of change in the lives of West African women. But as in the tale, this second journey after an interlude of partial healing remains a perilous road, crowded with wounded women and traumatized children, their search for justice comprising the first steps in the creation of genuine peace. For many of these Sierra Leone women only the twin hands of education and economic development will provide healing and a second chance.

"Handless Maiden" by Caz Love

The Armless Maiden, despite her vulnerabilty, her violent history, and her arduous solitary journey, has also inspired a wonderful rebellious and rejuvenating spirit in the new interpretations of her tale in modern poetry. In Rigoberto González's sensual poem The Girl With No Hands, the armless maiden is one of those rare creatures, a female trickster. The girl compares her severed hands to the stolen good luck charms of desiccated rabbit's feet but plans her own revenge. This is a clever armless maiden: "Resolute, you age with ingenuity, learning to eat/ right off the branch, nibbling apple, apricot, and pear without separating fruit from stem." She finds pleasure and sex in the garden with a hunter's son: "the piano that's played with elbows and knees and four clumsy/ heels that for all their random reaching make the sweetest rhythms." This armless girl has no fear of her father, but rather gathers her strength from her trickster heart with a "delectable defiance." She can not only self–generate a second pair of hands, but even more, she has "legs, torso, head, and a bear trap of a jaw to bite the hands that feed her."

In Conversation With My Father, Elline Lipkin offers a canny and wise girl who will not surrender her hands to her father. She "interlopes" down the aisles of a hardware store, a masculine world if ever there was one, intending to purchase a drill. Yet here amid threatening tools with "metal shapes that brag of power" she contemplates her relationship with her father. How much easier it might have been to born like the goddess Athena, "blasted out" of her father's head like a "sweep of clean logic." But she is not Athena, and her father has shaped her as something more fragile: a Thumbelina, a girl with breakable porcelain arms. In the hard violence of the folk–tale, it is the father's will to sever his daughter's hands because he wants it, he needs it. But in this poem, the would–be armless maiden refuses to comply. She will not allow the essential nature of her adult identity to have been initiated by an act of power over her. "Each pointed finger is my true weapon," she proclaims, refusing to allow her father to memorialize this defining moment in her life by bronzing "the cut cups of my palms." In the traditional versions of the narrative this violent act is essential to separate the girl from home and family and turn her out on a journey of maturation. But the modern armless maiden has begun to question whether we should permit our lives to be defined by such external acts of power, acts that emphasize our vulnerability rather than our personal strengths.

I have come to believe that robust narratives such as the Armless Maiden speak to women not only when they are young and setting out on that first rite of passage, but throughout their lives. In Women Who Run With the Wolves, psychologist Clarissa Pinkola Estés presents a fascinating analysis of this tale, demonstrating the guiding role the armless maiden plays in a woman's psychic life:

'The Handless Maiden' is about a woman's initiation into the underground forest through the rite of endurance. The word *endurance* sounds as though it means 'to continue without cessation,' and while this is an occasional part of the tasks underlying the tale, the word *endurance* also means "to harden, to make robust, to strengthen," and this is the principal thrust of the tale, and the generative feature of a woman's long psychic life. We don't just go on to go on. Endurance means we are making something.

To follow the example of the armless maiden is an invitation to sever old identities and crippling habits by journeying again and again into the forest. There we may once more encounter emergent selves waiting for us. In the narrative the armless maiden sits on the bank of a rejuvenating lake and learns to caress and care for her child, the physical manifestation of her creative power. Each time we follow the armless maiden she brings us face to face with our own creative selves. In an interview with Vicci Bentley of Poetry Magazines.org.uk, the British poet Vicki Feaver discusses the influence the Armless Maiden tales had on the way she perceives her writing process:

I read a psychoanalytic interpretation by Marie Louise von France in her book, *The Feminine in Fairytales* in which she argues that the story reflects the way women cut off their own hands to live through powerful and creative men. They

need to go into the forest, into nature, to live by themselves, as a way of regaining their own power. The child in the story represents the woman's creativity that only the woman herself can save.

Writing as the restored mother in her poem "The Handless Maiden," Feaver celebrates the resurgence of a woman's creativity. Restored to wholeness, the young woman sits on the bank, reveling in the newly discovered pleasures of attending her beautiful child. But as the child sleeps, "her heat passing/ into my breast and shoulder/ the breath I couldn't believe in," the new mother begins to cry, recalling the painful journey she has endured to reach this river. But the poem ends triumphantly, for even as she recalls with tears "my hands that sprouted/ in the red–orange mud" these are now also the hands that "write this, grasping/ [the child's] curled fist." The handless maiden has become the poet, articulating her own creative process, grasping the fruits of that work in the child's resilient "curled fist." Feaver writes, "In the end I chose the voice of the Handless Maiden herself — as if I was writing the poem with the hands that grew at the moment that she rescued her work, her child . . . I suppose I go through the process of endlessly cutting off my hands and having to grow them."

In the end this may be the most illuminating lesson of the armless maiden. She teaches us not to fear; for even wounded, sometimes abandoned, there is strength in our power to restore ourselves to wholeness — not once but many times throughout our lives. She illuminates the missteps that come when we settle for partial solutions, allowing us to experience through the images of the tale the stagnating effects of such capitulation. She journeys with us during those times when we have to venture back into the forest, the sign of our new and vulnerable selves in the child tied on our back. And she is there to witness the moment of our restoration, when we finally reach with new hands for our voices, our lives, and our futures.

Further Reading:

**Fiction:**
The Armless Maiden and Other Tales for Childhood's Survivors edited by Terri Windling.
Contains the story "Armless Maiden" by Midori Snyder
The Handless Maiden, a novel by Loranne Brown

**Nonfiction:**
Here All Dwell Free: Stories to Heal the Wounded Feminine, by Gertrud Mueller Nelson
The Feminine in Fairy Tales, by Marie–Louise Von Franz
The Fisher King and the Handless Maiden, by Robert A. Johnson

**On the Web:**
The Girl Without Hands, an annotated version of the fairytale
The Girl With No Hands, by Rigoberto González, an audio file in which González reads and discusses his poem
Pear, a poem by Nan Fry
Healing the Wounded Wild, by Kim Antieau
Old Wives Tales, by Terri Windling

**About the author:**
**Midori Snyder** is a writer, co–director of The Endicott Studio, and co–editor of the Journal of Mythic Arts. She lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. For more information, visit her Endicott **bio page**.

**About the artists:**
**Jeanie Tomanek** lives in Marietta, Georgia, and is represented by Trinity Gallery in Atlanta. Her paintings have appeared in many juried exhibitions throughout the Southeast, and can be found in numerous public and private collections in the United States and Europe. "Literature, folktales and myths often inspire my exploration of the feminine archetype," she writers. "My figures often bear the scars and imperfections that, to me, characterize the struggle to become. In my work I use oils, acrylic, pencil and thin glazes to create a multi–layered surface that may be scratched through, written on, or painted over to reveal and excavate the images that feel right for the work." Also a poet, Tomanek's poems have appeared in *Poets, Artists and Madmen*, *Birmingham Poetry Review* and *Poetry Motel*. For more information on the artist and her work, please visit her **website**.

**Caz Love** was born in Boston in 1971, and now makes her home in Los Angeles. She studied at CalArts, and at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Love specializes in three–dimensional work incorporating conceptual, craft–based and mixed–media elements, often using garments as representations of a woman's body and her experiences. Among recent works is an installation inspired by the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale. She describes it as "an homage to the thorns and raptures, the innocence of first kisses and schoolgirl crushes, the beauty and magnitude of true love, and the wounds of loves' endings." To see more of her work, please visit her **website**.

**Jenny Matthews** has worked as a photographer since 1982, publishing her work in a wide range of international magazines including *Marie Claire*, *Guardian Weekend Magazine*, *The Sunday Times*, and others. She has also done substantial work for development organizations such as Save the Children, Action Aid, and Oxfam. Her book *Women and War* (2003, University of Michigan) was short–listed for the John Kobal book award. To see more of her astonishing work, please visit her **website**.

**John Roy** was born in New Zealand and trained at Wanganui Polytechnic, graduating with a B.F.A. majoring in Ceramics in 1997. He won the Student Art Award from the Friends of the Dowse Art Museum in the same year. He has also won the Portage Ceramics Award, Waiheke Ceramics Award, Molly Morpeth Canaday CD Award for Ceramics, and a Premier Award from the New Zealand Society of Potters 45th National Exhibition. He exhibits his work throughout New Zealand.

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