

THE GLEEWOMAN'S NOTES

Friday, June 15, 2012

The Magic of Teasel

The bodies of those spiked plants I crooned over in my last post speak a strong language. They reached out and sang their strange, spindle-pricking song to me, and as it turns out, they are very potent indeed. It was not just my imagination.

My wonderful cousin Lyda informed me that this is teasel, or *dipsacus fullonum*. Its native homelands are the continents of Europe, Asia and Northern Africa. It is considered an invasive weed in North America. (A difficult concept for me—aren't the majority of us here "invasive"?) It turns out that the word "to tease," as in "to tease out a knot" is the root for the name "teasel" because the dried heads were used for centuries as carding combs, before metal spines were created in factories. If you run your fingers over one, dried a dark gold, you will understand why—they are taut and strong, so robust they make a plucked melody under your fingertips. Cobwebs get caught around them. I could untangle knots in my hair with a single empty seedhead without breaking it.



The Gleewoman's Notes



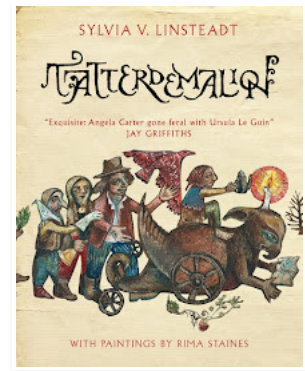
Welcome to the weblog of writer, artist and naturalist Sylvia Victor Linsteadt, author of *Tatterdemalion* (Unbound, 2017), *The Lost Worlds of the Bay Area* (Heyday, 2017), *The Wondements of the East Bay* (Heyday, 2014), and creator of all stories associated with Wild Talewort. For Sylvia's official website and a full listing of her work, classes and events, follow the link below!

A Note About the Name: "Gleeman" is the Old English word for a minstrel or a bard, the wandering, wild-hemmed sort who ambled from town to town with stories and songs in his pockets to share in exchange for bed and food and wine. The "glee" part of the word originally meant entertainment and mirth inspired by music, connected to the Old Norse *gla* for joy, which had its feet in the words for shining, smooth and radiant. I've taken some liberties with the word, feminizing it in a way that makes sense to me. So here you will find my notes and musings about words, tales, old myths, plants, animals, stones, skies, languages, human cultures, new dreams, handcrafts—all the stuff of old minstrel tales—and how we might re-story our relationship to this fraught and beautiful world through old ways and old magics.

Sylvia's Official Website



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The Latin name *fullonum* is related to the word “to full” which means “to card wool before spinning.” A fuller is a person who cards wool. The first part of the Latin name, *dipsacus*, means “to thirst” in Greek, and refers to the way the leaves gather water in their green bowl around the stem. Ancient Roman’s called teasel “Venus’s Basin,” and Christian’s “Mary’s Basin.” Perhaps they collected the water for their own joints. Teasel eases arthritis.

Plant biologists, on the other hand, speculate that these dew-receptacles prevent insects such as aphids from climbing anywhere near the flowers. They’ve filled up the bowls with dead bugs to test the results, and have found that the more rotting insects in that basin of Venus, the more seeds the teasel head produces. In other words, teasel absorbs the nutrients of dead bugs through its stem-bowls. It is partially carnivorous. That water is holy for the plant as well people—it is its own composting system.

Romany gypsies gathered rainwater from those teasel-bowls and used it for wrinkles and dark circles under the eyes. A common name for the plant is “gypsy-comb.”

Archive

- ▶ 2018 (1)
- ▶ 2017 (9)
- ▶ 2016 (16)
- ▶ 2015 (17)
- ▶ 2014 (34)
- ▶ 2013 (45)
- ▼ 2012 (40)
 - ▶ December (4)
 - ▶ November (4)
 - ▶ October (6)
 - ▶ September (4)
 - ▶ August (4)
 - ▶ July (5)
 - ▼ June (7)
 - [Thimbleberry Feltworks, Launched!](#)
 - [Oral Story-telling: A Piece of My Puppet Show](#)
 - [Grown-up Indigo and a Visit to the Workshop](#)
 - [The Magic of Teasel](#)
 - [The Mysterious Thorned Deer-Tonic](#)
 - [Clay Puppets, Thistles and the Fertile Chaos of An...](#)
 - [A Puppet Play, on the Way...](#)
- ▶ May (6)



Pick A Word...

- A Feral Palmistry
- A Green Language
- Abbott's Lagoon
- acorn
- acorn woodpecker
- acupuncture
- adventure
- alameda
- Alamere Falls
- Alan Garner
- alder
- almanac
- alpine
- Ambatalia
- american badger
- ancestry
- Andes
- anemones
- angiosperms
- angora rabbits
- animal processing
- animal tracking
- animism
- anthropocene
- anthropogenic landscapes
- antiques
- antler
- Apothecary's Cabinet
- archaeology
- archetypes
- Arctic Circle
- art
- artist conk
- Asia Suler
- aspen
- Athena
- Audubon
- autumn
- Baba Yaga
- bald eagle
- bard
- bare feet
- baskets
- bavarian cough syrup
- bay area
- Bay Area Puma Project
- bay laurel
- Beatrice and the Mail Truck
- bee hives
- Belgum Sanitarium
- Bell
- Beltane
- Beneath Ceaseless Skies
- Betsy Whyte
- bewick's wren
- Big Sur
- bishop pine
- black bear
- black sage
- black walnut
- black walnut dye
- blackberries
- blood
- blue
- blueberry
- bobcat
- bone



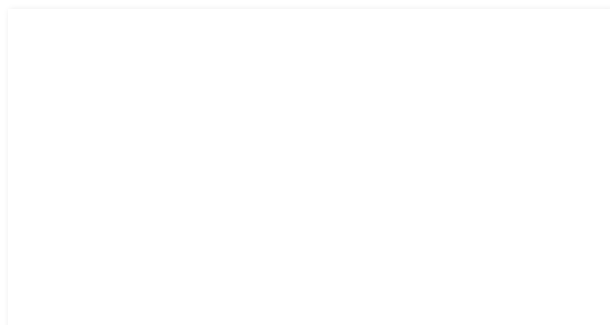
Japanese Teasel has been used in Chinese medicine for thousands of years. They call the plant Xu Duan, which means, “restore what is broken.” Japanese teasel root is used for arthritis, blood circulation, kidney cleansing and the healing of damaged tissues. In North America, herbalists such as Matthew Wood have discovered that common teasel can be used to treat lyme disease. A few drops of teasel-tincture can sniff out lyme disease bacterial cells where they hide, burrowed in joints. It chases them right into your blood, out of hiding, where other forms of medication can then destroy them.

Other medicinal uses I’ve discovered include: wort-cure, antibiotic, and eyewash.

There are powers deeper than words and deeper than songs that rest in the bodies of the plants all around us. Their characters are written in their shapes and colors, their curves and spines and flowers. This too is its own language, separate from the language of deer mouse tracks, vole tunnels, bobcat scratches, and thrush songs. Teasel is dressed in elegant, wily green armor. She guards her own.

Now I see why the deer take big, eager bites from the teasel leaves. They know their own midwifery better than any of us. I’d bet it was the does, cleansing their blood, soothing their joints, after the weight of fawn-birth.

None of this is to say that, at night, strange forms do not rise up from those basins, those carding-comb pods. Slight, tendriled figures that walk barefoot, dispense water from green leaf-bowls to mother creatures as they give birth—raccoons, squirrels, deer, snakes. Comb the burrs from their tails. Take the stray fur-pieces home and spin them into ropes for climbing down, down into the underworld, where necessary knowledge about rebirth, about chasing pain out of tight spaces, lives, pushed into deep quartz veins by the songs of moles. Where knowledge about smoothing out tangles and keeping the heart clear resides.



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Illustration by Arthur Rackham

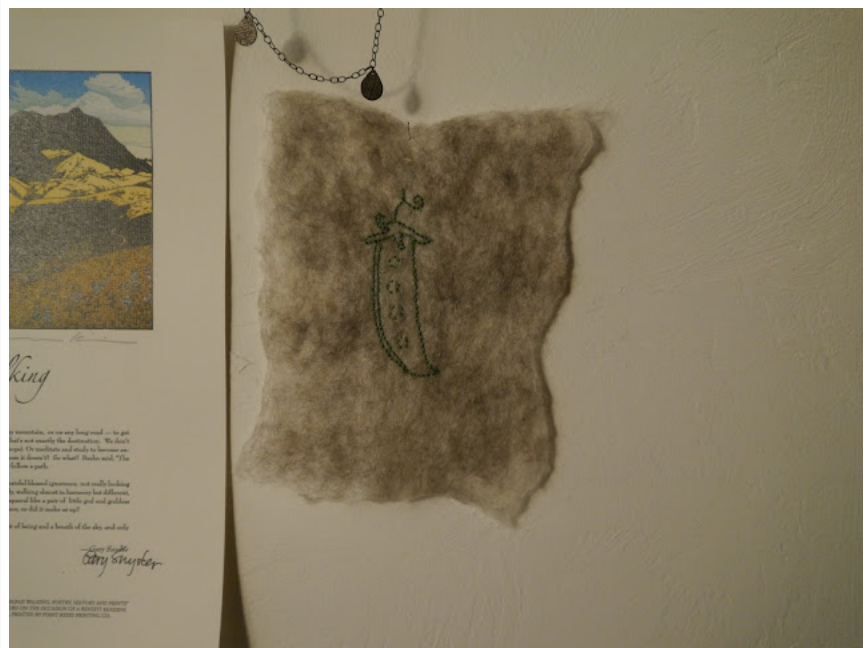


This week, I've also been at work on a felting project. I love the feeling of rolling and shaping felt, soapy warm hands and sore arms, the smell of wet wool. Because it's wet and a bit messy, it really demands to be made outside, on the deck, by the rosemary. The sun on my back. Listening to young blue jays screech, the towhees cheep. Having a ginger ale or a beer. Each piece of felt is a surprise, still alive in its form. You never know what it will be until it's done, the edges rippled like an animal hide. The act of felting is meditative. It warms up the body and quiets the mind.

I'm embroidering these with vegetables: first a sweet pea. I'm working on an artichoke and a carrot now. For hanging in the kitchen, or wherever you like. Honoring the forms and bounty of vegetables. I plan to make a variety of creatures too—fox, elk, owl, heron. More (and better) photos coming soon.

- Douglas fir
- Douglas iris
- Dr. Martin Shaw
- dragons
- drakaina
- dreams
- Dreamtime
- driftwood
- drought
- Druid
- dye
- e.e. cummings
- earth
- earth constellation
- ecoprint
- ecopsychology
- eggs
- Egypt
- elder
- elderberry
- elk
- Elk Lines
- Elktime
- ember
- England
- Etsy
- eucalyptus
- evening primrose
- fairy tales
- Fairyland
- family
- fantasy
- farallon islands
- feather
- felt
- felted cape
- feminism
- fibershed
- fiddler
- field
- fig
- fire
- fire ecology
- flea market
- flower essence
- flowers
- food
- fool
- forget-me-not
- Fort Bragg
- fur
- Gary Snyder
- Gathering Time
- give-away
- gleewoman
- goddess
- gold rush
- golden hills
- goldenrod
- goldfinch
- gooseberry
- granite
- gratitude
- Gray Fox Epistles
- gray squirrel
- great blue heron
- Greece
- green

I think I'll try combing a bit of uncarded wool I have with a teasel head, too.



Posted by Sylvia Linsteadt at 1:41 PM

Labels: doe, felt, moles, teasel, wool

2 comments:



THE OLD BURROW August 13, 2012 at 1:13 AM

Have only just stumbled upon your beautiful blog after a weekend admiring Teasels along roadsides and in those rough patches of land where wildflowers are allowed to be themselves. They have had an undeniable pull over me for months now and when that happens it's sure that they have something to offer. Your lovely ode to the Teasel has been very helpful. Thank you :-)

[Reply](#)



kateri ewing November 8, 2019 at 5:08 AM

I stumbled upon this and am so glad I did. I keep having the image of a basket of dried teasel showing up in my dreams. It's very clear. I love the plant and see it often on my field walks, but this dream is about something more. Some of your thoughts invited me to think about a few possibilities. Thank you!

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