While traveling in Switzerland I went on a walk among the vineyards and the apple orchards, picking at the fruit and marveling at the size of the sunflowers lounging at the side of the road like a pride of lions. From across the field I spotted her—an old woman dressed completely in black, a storybook witch on her way back to the forest.

Since I was seeking adventure on this otherwise quiet expedition, I followed her into the dark and silent woods, and I cursed my curiosity for taking me there. Until I stumbled upon the gingerbread house. It was actually a bird feeder hanging from a branch. And near the trunk was a chair made to look like a horse: a bucket shaped the mouth; dried leaves made the perfect ears. More transformations: plastic soda bottles became a mobile of airplanes; cans were crushed into mushrooms; an old boot opened its miniature hippopotamus mouth.

But no sighting of the artist. The old woman had done this, I was certain, so I respected her work and vanished, leaving her dazzling forest museum unmentioned, unphotographed, and for many years, unwritten, until I saw her figure reappear in my mirror at home, hunched over a cane, clad completely in black, and gathering bits and pieces of this and that in order to build a gallery of tiny gems, colorful and edible as gumdrops.