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Anima

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ANIMA

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Tessa N. Bryant

Spring 2018

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Haiku for Myself

Heart like the tree-shade of
a back hollow; fledgling
hands caked in red clay.

EVA

Careful the things you say; children will listen.
-Stephen Sondheim

Anima Eva

You were invented by an astronaut
looking back upon the earth. You are
the tear he shed for the dying mother
he left behind in the Texas scrublands.
You are the outermost moon of Mars,
which gave him such joy, which was
the last thing he ever saw.

Eden

Two large windows
look out on a small playground—
a slide, a climbing bridge, and a fence
to keep toddlers away from the brush.

Under one window, a library shelf overflows
with mostly torn-apart board books.
Under the other, a miniature kitchenette and vacuum.

Next to the bulletin board, rows of cubby holes
with plastic bins inside, each with
the photo of a fat toddler pasted on,
some smiling, some dazed, some sleeping.

On toddler-sized shelves, multicolored
boxes full of *twucks*, *fishies*, *bwocks*
of every size and shape,
bee-bees and their bottles,
stuffed *woof-woofs* and *rawr-bears*.

A high-up shelf holds a radio/CD player
that spins Tchaikovsky, Haydn,
Wheels On The Bus, and Itsy Bitsy Spider.
We gather underneath and *dance-dance-dance*.

In the center of the room, tiny tables and chairs
for painting and oatmeal-eating, drumming
and drawing. We sit together at lunch and
babble with each other, puffing up our cheeks
to trumpet like elephants.

Over the changing table, a small set of chimes
hangs as a reward for a brave diaper change.
A triumphant, round belly pokes out from under
a Daniel Tiger tee shirt as the arm stretches

to jangle them, and everyone freezes to see
who's done it this time. Who's made it to the top.

From this vantage, it's clear:
no king has known such dominion.
No ruler has stood upon their ramparts and
surveyed their kingdom with more pride.
No one can have it all, except here.

Heirloom

Grandma's family was poor.
The only white folks in town
who had to pick cotton.
She left her first husband
who beat her and sterilized
her with his venereal diseases.

She doesn't remember my face.
But when I'm asleep I can hear her
in my quilt, whispering to me
from between
the fibers.

I'm woven together with
grayscale pictures of
gray cotton dresses
gray cotton fields.

Oatmeal

A majority of childcare work is cleaning:
Small chairs thinly glazed with vanilla yogurt,
plastic cars and boats with unidentifiable
brownish grit, stuffed animals mysteriously
dampened throughout the day. Even the walls
must be scrubbed down during nap time.

The children themselves stay at least partially
coated in one bodily fluid or another at all times.
It's part of the appeal; miniature editions of us,
gorgeous despite their grime, touchingly helpless,
unable to even wipe the snot from under their
own little noses.

If only we could be so beautiful in our filth,
learning and growing even when
there's shit in our pants.

The New World

I'm on the bus, alone
save the bus driver. No other
passengers have joined us this
dreary Wednesday afternoon.
I am thinking of my friend,

who is two and a half. He's doesn't
like to speak, and joins in the finger
painting only if you take his hand
and press it into the paint yourself.

He always looks stunned, as if he
enters a new world every time he
shifts his gaze. Today, as he looked up
from catching a kickball, he saw
a construction crane across the street.
Ah! he said, pointed, and smiled.

Toil

As a child, I dug a hole in my backyard
in a patch of red clay where grass couldn't grow.
For an entire summer, I went out back every day
and dug under the sun for hours until, finally,
I was in so deep I couldn't get out.

I never asked myself why I was digging or
what I expected to find. I'd simply imagined myself
some lowly serf, put in my place (a ditch), having
been commanded by my lord to toil, perhaps
for the hope of an extra bale of grain
come harvest time—

whatever harvest a hole might bring.

History Lesson

Citizen, watch!

A white wave
is overtaking your childhood home,
swallowing up your whole family and
all the neighbor kids.

This wave is ceaseless.
There was no earthquake, and there is
no wind. The moon is exactly
where it ought to be.
This wave is a great controversy.

The scientists are whispering:

*There is enough evidence to suggest that
this has been occurring since
the dawn of time And yet*

we never saw it coming.

Transfiguration

The winter mourns into spring; the ice-drops
gliding down your window teach you
to remember, your eyes bend past the sun
to the edge of what you've known. You

are standing in tiny gumboots, head craned
backward, catching raindrops on your tongue.
One falls into your eye and for a moment, you think
you are blind. In this moment, you are changed.

You are falling from a tall tree in the woods. You are
lying on the floor of the forest without a name.

In the Town Where I Was Born

Before me,
Mom had a good job.
An assistant in the mayor's office.

Late at night, alone
with me, she cried because
she didn't know any lullabies.
So she sang the only song
she could think to sing.

*We all live in
a yellow submarine
a yellow submarine
a yellow submarine.*

William

He tells me his favorite color is
one. His lips purse between answers,
his hair catching flecks of afternoon.
He rolls a pine needle between
his bony fingers until it breaks.

He does not know his dog's name, he
tells me, but he does have one. We've been
talking like this for almost ten minutes
now: on the pavement, bits of gravel
sneaking into our shoes as we roll a kickball
back and forth.

When it's time for him to go, he stops
at the gate to remind me that there was
an airplane overhead earlier, and that it had
people in it. I wonder how he knows this
for sure.

Part of Me

She: half naked and sobbing
next to the toilet.

Me: grasshoppered in a miniature plastic
school chair, hands in vinyl powder-
free gloves.

*I can't let it go, she cries,
Don't flush it!*

I reach for the lever, eager to get the
shit down the drain and to move on with
my day—I have other asses to wipe, other
tantrums to manage—but still, at the toilet,
in a too-small chair, wrangling a thirty-
six pounder into a pull-up diaper.

*Why can't I flush it? I sigh.
Because, she sobs, It's part of me.*

In Miniature

Twenty two of them. Falling, crying,
clambering back up
before the eye can catch it.

One is singing, another is painting the window.
Still another is climbing up on the sink, his little head
craned into the basin to let water wash over his sticky face.
They saturate the room like beads of sweat on a glass—
each only a couple of feet high, nearly scaling the walls.
Gumdrop swampland. Toys swarm, snot runs, spit flies.

Tears rush out from the corners of their eyes
as if from a cracked dam. If you're good, you can spot
fissures and fill them as the day goes on. But sometimes
there's too much to be held back—the sudden burst
pulls them under, their joy disintegrated like old concrete.

At lunch, a girl transforms from a toddler into a
frantic thirty-something in a private cubicle at the bank,
the card declined one too many times, the
credit score too low to get a loan. Her face goes purple,
angry veins burst from her bald head, her eyes
compress to slits. She falls to the ground, smacks her head
on linoleum tile, sobs as if she were dying.

The milk had not been refilled quickly enough.
Life is often like this.

In miniature, the line between an empty paper plate
and an empty bank account is nearly invisible.
The inner life demands audience, no matter
how small the lake, how weak the stream.

Daddy's Girl

I must have been twelve

midnight

my parents divorced

dad with custody

I wanted to sleep in his bed

because I was still afraid

of the dark

he told me people

might get the wrong idea

what people I thought

I just wanted to sleep

with my daddy

Oak

A child, you
watch headlights passing along the walls
in the night you

creep down from your oak tree & crawl
through drainage tunnels to the other side of the
road you watch

your baby brother sleeping
in morning light

you dig a hole
through red clay
to no place

lightning strikes your oak tree & you watch it.

HELENA

*Men often ask me, “Why are your female characters so paranoid?”
It’s not paranoia. It’s recognition of their situation.
-Margaret Atwood*

Anima Helena

Left to the night, we are pagan. Our eyes,
moons which pull us like spring blossoms
from the earth, settle us like petals in the
grass. We are many-armed, frightening
beasts with legs spread wide in supplication.

We no longer hide in caves and tents as we
bleed and mourn ourselves. We create our
sex from dirt, from emptiness, from bruises.

Our eyes roll back in our heads as we please
ourselves, as we break and re-mold our flesh
into blades of sunlight. This is how we will
give birth to the new world. We are accustomed
to needle pricks and dismemberment.

The threats of men die, shriveled, in their mouths.
They may stay as long as they like; they cannot
smoke us out.

Father

Where will we hide
when he comes home and sees
we've been bad all day?

What will he do when he sees
the spill in the kitchen, the
morning paper still in the drive
which he reminded us to fetch
before he left for work?

We have not cleaned
our rooms and we have
not pulled the weeds
from the garden bed.

We have failed to polish
the mirror, and cannot
look ourselves in the eye.

Perhaps he'll believe
we wanted to clean it
but were not tall enough
to reach.

Jezebel

You're such a good slut for Daddy,
 he tells me over the phone. I
 have become something unlike
 what I thought of myself. I
 thought I might make it to the
 end of the slasher flick, be the
 one who makes it out alive. *I*
am a good slut, I reply. *A good*
girl.

A good girl. Will my daughter do
 this? Will we always be allowed
 to touch ourselves like this, so
 freely, so wanton?

He has pictures of me. Of a
 good slut, a bad girl. My mouth
 is dry, and I want to cup my
 hands for the rain I wish would
 fall. In moments like these, he
 owns me. I've asked him to. And

I willingly submit. This is how I
 own myself, his voice controlling
 my hands from thousands of
 miles away. *You need this*, he growls,
don't you? I do. Like a lioness, ripping
 flesh into bites for my young. When
 the zookeeper passes it through the
 metal door, I roar.

He likes me wild, says that my wildness
 proves the sweetness of my captivity. If
 I didn't bite, there would be no point
 in caging me. So the credits roll, the

girl having left the cabin in the woods,
the flashlight being left behind, the axe
having proven too dull.

When he asks me the next morning,
I tell him *No, I don't want to fuck
myself right now*. I can tell him no, he's
assured me. I remember the photos,
the fears I've whispered on the floor
of my closet, the man in a suit
who screamed at me when I ordered
the last blueberry bagel. *You don't need
to be sorry*.

It's your body. He can feel me spooking,
backing away from the gate, and holds
his hand out to help me down the stairs
to the basement.

Sex Dream

Follow me down to the cesspool
by the chemical wastes
lay your eggs next to mine
like salmon's babies
when they fertilize
we will become one another
our pregnancies will saturate
the ground with whispers
trust me
he loves you
our translucent children
will delight in the scandal
champagne flutes of afterbirth
dreams about coworkers
sex dampening with the fright
of knowing oneself
empirically

Believe Me

I'm laughing, dumb

struck by his gentleness and confusion—
you don't really think he'd do that, do you?

Of course he would, dad. That's what men do.

Little Girls

after the song by Lerner & Lowe, popularized by Maurice Chevalier

(You were sixty-nine when they had you sing)

when I see
a little girl / of
five or six or seven

I can't resist a
joyous urge / to
smile and say
thank heaven

for little girls for

(Joyous
That sultry swaying warble

A little soft shoe for the
girls
in the audience, Mo!
Give 'em the eyes old boy,
Give 'em the moves!
Those)

little girls / get
bigger every day

(thank heaven for the girls, Mo
for the girls)

they grow up in / the most
delightful
way

those little eyes / so
 helpless
 and
 appealing

when
 they were flashing / send
 you crashing
 through the
 ceiling
 Thank heaven
 (yes, Mo!)
 for little girls

no matter where (they'll find you)
 / no matter
 who
 without them
 what would little
 boys do?

(What indeed, what
 indeed, old pal!)

oh!
 oh!
 oh! thank
 heaven thank
 heaven
 thank
 heaven for

little
 girls

The Work Week

friday

I haven't been sleeping well

tuesday

CAMPUS ALERT Subject: Lewd Conduct
 Once again,
 we had the same thing happen
 to another female student
 but this time
 she was able to get the license plate.

wednesday

He is dancing and yelling
 next to your table at a bar and you
 walk in pairs
 to alert the bar staff who will nod
 and say *We'll take care of it* but he
 will
 be back ten minutes later
 making eyes and assuring you
I'll stay in my own personal space.

tuesday

He is described as:
 30s, light hair, round face, scruffy
 speaks with an accent.

monday

bait
 a skirt blown up
 in mid-April

my blood
 in the water
 in broad daylight
 he followed me home
 five blocks
 across the street and back
 and across and back
 again I thought
 I'm not even
 that pretty I thought
 why is he pointing his phone
 at me I thought
 is he going to try anything
 surely
 not
 if I get to the door fast enough
 or if I speed up eventually
 someone will notice
 when I get there
 and shut the door quick
 behind me he waits
 to watch me a few moments
 longer
 through the window I ask him
what do you want from me?

tuesday

A female student reported
 that in the 400 block of E. Sinto,
 an unknown male called her over to his vehicle
 under the premise he needed directions
 because he was new to the area.

Once she approached his window,
 she saw that his hand was down
 the front of his pants and was
 fondling himself. She immediately
 left the area and did not get a license plate.

thursday

He gets in my line
 He
 this man
 I don't know this well dressed man
 with salt and pepper slicked back
 this man with glasses that suggest
 we voted for the same woman
 this man winks
 leans on the counter
aren't you just cute as can be then
 tucks his tail
Am I even allowed to say that anymore?
What am I allowed to say?
 he jokes
 They're all afraid now

I tell him *It's fine to call me cute*
sweet as pie, even
I am, after all, serving pie

But can I? he interrupts
But can I? Where's the line?
 He says this as though
 he knows perfectly well
 the line, where
 it ought to be drawn
 I say so
 he smiles
 chooses the brambleberry
I have the faculties, of course.
I have the faculties
to know
there is a line
at all

but what would you say
to a man who doesn't?

He's holding up the line. I say
Treat me like anyone else.

The way I'd treat a man?

Yes, I guess. Like
 a man.

tuesday

In both instances,
 he did not
 expose himself
 but fondled
 himself.
 According to security,
 Crime Check was notified.
 Please let us know
 if you have
 had any contact with
 this
 person /
 vehicle.

friday

*This woman's way of thinking
 my student writes
 is more detrimental to girls
 than any "social norms."*

*This woman
 I've assigned him is
 a leftist who
 would have us all believe
 women are the
 object*

of discrimination

*There is, my student writes,
no concrete evidence
of this*

monday

I haven't been sleeping well

He Caught Me
after Lorine Niedecker

He caught me

looking at my
 reflection in the window,

 admiring my
 self; I

didn't mind.

To-Do List

We're on a date and discussing pubic hair removal when he says, *it's so annoying. It gets in the way.* He says this the way my gynecologist told me my cervix is unusually low and tight, right after he hit it with the speculum and I yawped.

I ask him what other things he finds so annoying about our bodies. He doesn't get the joke and gives me a list. *Y'all have so much shit to fix in the morning. I know you've got long hair, but it takes you so long to shower.*

The vagina too, he teaches me, is so very finicky. *It's dry when you want it to be wet. When it's wet it smells weird.* There are so many different spots, he says, to try to attend at once. *And once you figure out what works, the spots all change* and you have to spend time figuring it out all over again. *So much work.*

And work it is, indeed, to have these parts. The dress codes, the accoutrements. The versions of things that cost two dollars more in order that they might be manufactured in pink. To keep the bedsheets clean, the shit fixed, the pH balanced.

I file his list away with all the others. Ten Ways To Get The Pay You Deserve. The new Korean beauty regimen. My mother's instructions for staying safe in the city. How To Get Fit For Summer. The letter from sleep-away camp that requested *one-piece swimsuit*
tee shirt (for over the swimsuit; not white)
pads (just in case!)

Just in case, of course. Carry the pepper spray, just in case. Double check you've locked the door, just in case. An extra pair of nylons in the desk at work, just in case. Take your drink with you to the bathroom, just in case. Walk in pairs, just in case. Shave your legs, just in case. Take the pill, just in case. Get a pelvic exam, just in case. The nice bra, just in case.

You can never be too careful. There's always more to be done. *In case of what?* he'll ask. Better to ask the ones who made the list.

As we make our way to after-dinner drinks, I note a poster advertising a speaking series: women who've devoted their lives to ending child marriage and female circumcision. *How do you even circumcise a woman?* he balks.

There will be no second date.

This is a Good Thing

It is a good thing to be afraid of the dark. It is a good thing too, to be afraid of the quietness when everyone else is asleep. It is a bad thing to be sure of oneself at all times, in all times. It is a good thing to be unsure that this is all you have ever wanted.

Love Thyself

When I am old, I will
hire a teenaged boy
to hang mirrors
in every room in my house,
one for every year
I have lived and loved
myself more than I
have loved those whom
I hate. I will look
into every mirror in
every room in my house
and ask *Why have you
not loved those whom
you hate as much as you
have loved yourself?* And
in each of the mirrors,
in each of the rooms,
the reflection of myself
as an old woman
will turn and walk out
the door.

MARIA

*Life began with waking up and
loving my mother's face.
-George Eliot*

Anima Maria

Our story is one of children laid in baskets,
bathing the feet of Christ with our hair.

When the curtain in the temple split,
we did not hear the earth rumble.

Her husband died, and we followed her
wherever she went, wherever she stayed.

The others turned their eyes, but we watched
each drop of blood roll down his face.

At what we were told was the end,
one of the young men had to drag us away.

Night Nurse

You're holding a child,
her eyes gazing up, tethered
to yours.

She is not your child. She
rests her fat hand on your
breast, and she is not your child.

You will feed her, clean her,
rock her to sleep. She will be
confused and call you mommy.

But still, you will have to give
her back. You'll hold her a little
while even after she's fallen asleep.

Sometimes

I have very vivid dreams. Once or twice a week I wake myself shrieking. Sometimes in the dream I am voiceless and cannot move. Sometimes my hands move when I haven't told them to. Sometimes they murder a child whose face I cannot see, and I shriek myself awake, shocked. Sometimes I shriek but do not wake.

Other times, my dreams are very beautiful. I see the future before dream-eyes. I have met my children in dreams, though they have not yet been conceived. I have found my son and held him, but have never known his name.

The Gospel of Andrea Yates

And the Lord sent an angel to her bedroom saying,

Andrea: You are a good and faithful daughter of Yahweh.
You have studied His word and kept His commandments,
honored your husband and kept silent in time of pain and trial.
You have given suck to babes at your breast, kept a home
and sown your seed. And now, Mary, the child you've borne,
lies in her cradle. She may grow up and, like you, be taken.
Her innocence may turn to dust, her beauty obscured
by time and work, her body broken by the birth of many sons.
But this is not the will of the Lord, our God.

His will is this: you shall
wait until your husband goes to work,
quietly fill the bathtub as the children play,
take John, Paul, Luke, Noah, and Mary one by one
in your arms, and send them home.
Place them as if in slumber on your marital bed
and, as he grants you the strength, run
home to our Father, child. This is your
instruction, Andrea. This is
the word of the Lord.

Hundred Acre Wood

I learn that this boy
who looks like he could be my son
is with his fifth foster family,
and he is 13 months old. I learn
that this boy, he is sweet.

He comes to rest
his head on my shoulder
when I am sitting on the floor
reading to other children. My boy,

he doesn't cry when his foster mom
drops him off in the morning. He
eats all his food at each meal,
he waddles around the classroom
without picking up any toys.

When it's time for nap, my boy
can't fall asleep on his own. He
is tense in my arms until his eyes
close and his breathing is
slow and even.

As I watch his eyes dart behind their lids,
I wonder who will make sure
he knows about Mary Poppins, about
putting potato chips on sandwiches,
about boogeymen, heffalumps,
monsters, and strangers. About how
to get back to Pooh Corner.

He wraps his fist around my index finger
in his sleep, and I am afraid. I want to
hold him forever. I want his first word to be
my name.

Amelia

The blonde-haired baby in my class turned a year old in January, a few months ago now. She points at everything and everyone, a glint of knowing in her eye, and asks *that?* when she can't think of the right word.

She knows most of my other kids and their names. She points out that they wear pants, have cups. When my littlest is holding the baby, it's called *Quin Baby*, and when she's swaddling it with a washcloth, it's called *Melia Baby*. In the afternoons, we turn on *mugic* and dance until it's time for *ousside*.

We're working on colors, too. *Mama* has a *back* car and ketchup is *wed*. The other day she observed that *Te-ssa's arm* is *white* and has *dots*. She has noticed that *Yahya's eyes* are *bown* like *chocowate*.

During naptime one day, when I'd turned my back, she took a baby from the shelf and swaddled it in her blankie. I didn't notice until I heard her whisper,

Shhh, my baby. I love you, my baby. You sleep, my baby.

There's a Lamb in Our Pasture with Two Broken Legs

That one? With the broken legs?
Found him over on the side of

the hill on those big rocks. It got
away from the flock, we figure,

took a tumble. Come to find out,
some miners' boys from down in

the valley put a little guy up to it.
Police said he turned himself in,

that he felt real bad about it, cried
until he couldn't even talk. It's been

a couple weeks but Mama still goes
out there every day to feed it, like it

can't feed itself. No, its mama's still
out there too. Don't know why she

she needs to feed it. It's gonna be all
right. They always heal up just fine.

Postpartum

Footage from the trial over Caylee Anthony's
death is looping over and over on CNN,
the anchors aghast, funereal.

I announce my shock and disgust.
No pain could induce me to murder
my hypothetical child, her face
so much like mine.

*You never know, my mother says. If I had given in
and killed myself,*

I couldn't have left you behind.

In My Dreams

My son is an infant in my dreams. His eyes are difficult to look into because looking into them is like looking into the sun. In my dreams we go on hikes. His little body is held to my chest by cloth wrapped around the both of us. He sleeps while we hike, little grunts and coos in the silence of the woods. His velvet head rests on my chest as drool pools in the hollow of my clavicle. When we hike in my dreams, my son and I, we go nowhere, but I am the happiest I have ever been.

Marshmallow

is the code word
we pass from
classroom to classroom
when it is time
to pretend a shooter
is prowling the halls.

Turn off the lights,
gather the toddlers
into the five by five
foot bathroom,
show them all how
to crouch into balls
like little mice next
to the baby-sized
toilet. Hand out

crackers, whisper-
hum twinkle
twinkle little star
to quiet them
as you cover
their bodies
with yours.

Kingdom

Something you've got to know is you're not getting nothing in this world. He says he's building you that house, but none of it's going to be yours. None of it. Not them apple trees, not the Singer, not even that apron. He can take it right away and no one will know it was ever yours. It'll have his name on it. So you best take care of that baby while you've got her. She's the only thing you're ever going to have that can't nobody tell you ain't yours. And even she'll have his name.

Mother as Lamb

If you need a sacrifice,
drive your knife
into my belly. Make
a communion cup of
me. Hang my entrails
over your doorframe
to please the angel of
death. Scatter my hair
like ashes at the shore
line and chant psalms
of thanks. Mount my
head at the city gate,
pallid and sobering.

Shame/Ovum

Your father held me through the panic
for three minutes
I thought you might have been alive

You were a deep breath
I couldn't take I suffocated
in the shadow of your portrait: an apparition

negative relief

I've written a book for you
but when you knocked on my door
I was too frightened to open it

I'm sorry

The next time you slip your natal fingers through the vale
I promise
I will be ready for you

SOPHIA

*Who knows where a woman begins and ends?
Listen... I have roots deeper than this island.
Deeper than the sea, older than the raising of the lands.*

*I go back into the dark.
-Ursula K. Le Guin*

Anima Sophia

after Jorge Luis Borges

At night, I take walks through neighborhoods,
outlying streets, under the weighty branches
of oaks and maples, hiding from the stars and their
eternal Queen, wishing away my dim smallness,
wishing to be blind.

At daybreak, I am carried back by a white tiger—
who teaches me her ferocity, her pride—to the front
stoop of my home where I play at becoming Hera's
priestess, eyes wide, arms outstretched.

The birds make no songs. What use are they now,
those greedy melodies to opened eyes, those
pagan spectacles of color, those wings bragging
the joy of flight, shamelessly and selfishly
taunting the earthbound?

In the tiger's westward eyes, I see my daughter
and hurry back to the night. She waits by the river
to show me her open palms, the virgin truth
that eyes cannot see.

I can teach her only that birdsong is not eternal, that we are
daughters—everything and nothing—designed to translate
the coming and going of days without wings,
having seen the gods and their riches and
taken too much pleasure in it.

O Young Girl

Don't forget the afternoon
when you sat on the pavement,
the smoke from Montana
reimagining the sun,
and the boys sat around
as you ate a ladybug.

I couldn't catch you
before it went down. You
laughed as it scrambled in
your throat and tossed
a handful of pebbles at
the boy who ran to me, teary-
eyed, confessing he'd given
you a *poison beetle*, that your
life wavered in the balance.

Your smile met me over the boy's
shoulder as I held him and said,
*You don't need to be afraid. It's just
a little bug.* He shook his head,
informed me that *little things can
kill big kids.*

*Yes, of course. But girls, I suggest,
might be tougher than you think.*

Mother as Lover

Her hair: rainforest

creatures hidden under
low-growing ferns,
pollinating poisonous flowers
& bringing the delectable spoils
to the queen, lavish and mighty
in her holy brothel.

Her womb: kauri

roots like bloodstreams,
face hidden
behind Abraham's nameplate.
a double x world
blinded by jeweled
scepters and
anointed prophets.

Her army: a universe

daughters
in yellow dresses
who do not regret
trampling on roses
for they do not mind
the thorns.

Foster

She has been part of six families in
her two-year life. Her tongue, throat, gut
scourged by poor motherhood, meth. You
wouldn't know by watching. She runs faster
than any of the rest, climbs like she could
never fall,

as if the spirit in her body, gilded
by not-knowing, cannot die.

Fledglings

Don't you think?

The girl next to me has been drinking
vodka and lime for the last two hours.
I have been reading, working on
a lukewarm amber.

Don't you think? Don't you think?

I realize she's talking to me. *Don't I
think what?* I reply, hoping I haven't
been rude, missed the story. *That*

life is bullshit.

She has eyes like half-blown-away dandelions,
searching for an answer, a wish
she might grant herself.

I guess it feels that way sometimes, I offer. It does.
She downs her drink without taking her eyes
off mine. A challenge? Plea? Sign?

We say nothing, watch one another watching
the other, wait for the ceiling to open up,
for a great mother eagle to carry us

to the ledge we should have found by now
to the jump we're both too scared to take.

Incubator

I don't want [my daughters] [to] grow up into career obsessed banshees who [forgo] home life and children and the happiness of family to become nail-biting manophobic hell-bent feminist she-devils.

- Courtland Sykes, Missouri candidate for U.S. Senate, 2017

The Cabbage Patch doll with matted hair. The fat cheeks pressed between the bars, watching the new baby breathe. The television set to TV Land—*Leave it to Beaver* rolling monochrome in the sun-sparkle dust of morning.

She is looking for abandoned fetuses in the woods. She is asking her Sunday School teacher why Mary dried his perfumed feet with her hair. She is picking the lock on the office door to get to the crying newborn.

Babies returning to dreams, wake to find blood on the sheets. A curriculum vitae five miles long. No positions available at this time. Many months since the last eucharist. Do you hear me? So much potential.

You are too smart. Become a doctor or lawyer. Enter an industry that will not listen to you. Use your intellect to no avail. Wear the red cloak. Would you like to be a handmaid?
Mommy. She called me Mommy.

The Word of the Lord

At the end of a long, barren road,
your grandmother's grandmother will
tell you: *I am a secret. No one must know.*
You will want everyone to know. But
this is the instruction.

After many years, you will tell someone this
most blessed secret, but they will call you a liar, a heretic,
a crazy person. Betrayed, your cheeks will flush with
shame. You will travel the long, barren road to
confront your grandmother's grandmother
with this terrible shame, but she will have been
dead for many years. A great lie.

Childhood Friend
after Philippe Soupault

Flying as if a dervish
winking her way up the moon
she calls after you
to say that breakfast was delicious
And your eyes drop like lampshades
surrendering to the nighthood of yourself
When she returns with grief
dripping from her hair
she will smile at you like a morning glory
which has been gilded
in our museum of iniquities
much like kisses from the stars
Are you
praying
or are you constructing
a tomb underneath your floorboards
for the uncooked rice
and fear
Give up your dreams of
orange groves She
is somersaulting across
the Sahara trying to tell you
She will not lie down in it

Empire

It is simple to build an empire:

1. Carefully choose a plot of land.
2. Stake your claim to your mother's crown.
3. Inform the necessary officials regarding the transfer of power.
4. Wait for the villagers to gather.

Call Her Blessed

“...and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.” -Titus 2:4-5

I learned early that God blesses mothers.
The beauty of motherhood is sacred, blessed,
meant to redeem us—there is often redemption in broken
bodies. We all knew this. We, young girls opening
into our womanhood, virginal in the grace of God.
Before other men loved us, before we left our fathers.

We delighted, basked in the love of the Father,
He who knew us before we knew our mothers.
Sanctification was our extracurricular god—
my god, we were desperate to be called blessed.
We could recite Proverbs Chapter 31 without opening
our Bibles. A cord of our strands couldn't be broken.

We didn't know the ways our mothers were broken,
the way their spirits shrank in submission to our fathers,
how their obsolete hearts felt most alive upon opening
the front door. Our iron-cast mothers
told us their lives were beautiful, they'd been blessed
by our light, by us—the images of God.

I don't know whether I ever believed in God
or believed in the fear of being broken,
being denied access to a life that was blessed.
I listened carefully on Sundays, watched my father
raise his hands in praise, wondered if my mother
had ever done the same, her soul gilded, opening.

Soon we learned about genitals ripping from opening
to opening, forceps plucking a precious gift from God
from the devastation of the womb. How mothers
shat themselves in hospital beds, coccyx bones broken,

doctors adding extra stitches as they joked with the fathers.
That this was the sacrament our Father had blessed.

Once we knew we'd already been blessed,
we felt less and less frightened of boys, of opening
our hearts and legs. We had no masters, not even our fathers,
and we learned that our fathers knew nothing about God.
We girls in the pews were mighty enough to be broken,
to bear the weight of salvation, to be called Mother.

More and more, I feel sure that Father God
would have never openly watched Christ's body broken,
had He been truly blessed, had He been a mother.

Parts

My children are learning the names for the parts
of their bodies. They pat each other's bums and elbows,
point their fat fingers at their bellies and tummies
when asked where their carrots went during lunch.

Made out of stickiness and fluff and goo now,
still they have noses and teeth, their tiny shoes
on their tiny feet.

I try not to lie to my children, not to tell them
that they have pookies or friends or pee-pees or privates,
but vulvas, penises, testicles, nipples; all the frightening
parts they've had since birth.

When asked where their eyes are, some will delicately pat
their closed lids with the palms of their hands while
others will press their still-baby fingers into the hollows
of their sockets, proving they know what they have and are
not afraid.

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