Anima

Tessa N. Bryant

Eastern Washington University

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ANIMA

A Thesis

Presented To

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Tessa N. Bryant

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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.
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
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.
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.
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.
Life began with waking up and loving my mother’s face.

- George Eliot
Anima María

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.
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
In Our Veins, In the Street

Return, as a pilgrim,
to your mother's breast.

Thank her

for her milk
for the marrow in your bones &

bless her, anoint her head.

Cry for her, remind her
that you still wake in the night,
frightened of the vacuum between
your eyes and the ceiling,
    too much
of the world for your small, bleary eyes,
your blanket no protection against
the velocity of the earth,

its spinning.
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 a 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.
VITA

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