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The Lessons of Charity Lamb
By Melia Hannigan-Luther
(Poem style based off of Jamaica Kincaid's poem "Girl")

Daughter.

Sweet, innocent child. When you are young you may play when you are not working, but when you are a woman you will always be working. This is how you feed the goats, and this is how you fill the pail with water. Yes, you may go jump rope with your friends, be back for supper. This is how you collect the chicken eggs. This is how you add numbers. Soon you will be too old to play marbles with the boys anymore. This is how you knead the dough. This is how you put your hair in a bun. You're too old for braids. This is how you sweep the floor. This is how you pull carrots from the earth without the tops breaking off. Your brothers are still in school because they are boys and you are a girl. Slaughter the pig and don't get blood on your apron. This is how you wash the blood from your apron. Hang your apron to dry. Girl, please stop getting your dress dirty before Sunday. Your father has found a man for you to marry.

Wife.

When you are a wife you will love your husband because he will give you a home to live in. This is how you love that man. This is how you pretend to love that man. Cook him meals and don't be late. This is how you make him happy. You'd better make me happy. When a man is not happy with his wife he will toss her aside and take a new one. Do you want to be tossed aside? THEN NEXT TIME DO WHAT I SAY! You'd better give me a son. What use is a girl?

Mother.

When you are a mother you must protect your children, keep them safe. You need to keep us safe. But Papa can't know, he'll think you don't trust him. Even if you don't trust him. Love us endlessly, but don't always show it. He might not like it. He might get jealous. This is how you soften his anger. But if that doesn't work, this is how you duck when his fist flies. And if that doesn't work, this is how you stifle your cries so we won't worry. This is how you get hit instead of us. Take our bruises on yourself. Most of them at least. Hide them because he'll get angry and add more. I can't take anymore. I'm his daughter, why won't he love me? I need you. Help me escape, please. Mama! It's too late for you, but not me. This is how you flinch and wait for the slap when he finds out. This is how I scream when he grabs me by my hair and whispers that he'll kill me if I try to run again.

Murderer.

When you begin to lose your mind the monsters he's forced upon you start to show. This is how we take over. You see no choice. No choice but to stop it. This is how you take the axe. This is how you hurt him. Hurt him like he hurt you. Hurt him because he made you capable of hurting someone like this. Your children are ripped from your arms, too shocked to even fight. This is how you get locked away. This is

how you cry when the judge says, "GUILTY." This is how you get locked away again. But this time, for much longer.

Prisoner.

When you walk in, ignore the men's ugly, hungry stares. Ignore my wandering hands as I lead you. Don't let their grimy hands touch you, you don't want to know where they've been. This is how you work. Boil the potatoes. Stir the pot. Don't be lazy you bitch. Serve the meals. Wash the dishes. Your hands crack and bleed from the labor. Don't let them see, it's a weakness. They'll like it. You slut. Shivering from the constant cold, belly shrinking to near nothing. This is how you keep your head low. Don't look at anyone. This is how you stay quiet. This is how you stay invisible. Scrub the floor. Wipe the blood away. This is how you kneel. KNEEL! This is how you stay alive. This is how you keep them happy. You're not invisible. BE INVISIBLE! THEY'LL LEAVE YOU ALONE! Don't think about it too much, it'll be easier that way. This is how you are alone.

Insane.

When you are alone for 4 years, you don't know if you're dead or not. Are you dead? Is this death? No, you're just alone. Alone. Alone. Alone. Alone. Alone. The blackness closing in. This is how you lie for hours. Alone. Thinking too much. Alone. Ugly thoughts. Alone. They won't go away. Alone. This is how the crack of light appears along with a tray of food. You call this food? You're grateful anyways. This is how you're alone again. Alone. So alone.

The End.

When you are a patient in an Insane Asylum in 1862, you wish you were dead. It becomes too much. This is how you stop eating. This is how you start screaming. *Yes, you may go jump rope with your friends, be back for supper.* They can't make you stop. *KNEEL!* You want to stop. *Do you want to be tossed aside? THEN NEXT TIME DO WHAT I SAY!* This is how we strap you down. This is how we run the tests. *BE INVISIBLE! THEY'LL LEAVE YOU ALONE!* This is how it hurts. You start to fade away. But it takes too long. *Stifle your cries so we won't worry.* You want away. *The blackness closing in.* This is how we make it last longer, hold onto you. *Why won't they let you go? Help me escape, please. Mama!* This is how you stop. *Sweet, innocent child.* This is how you end it. You found a way to end it. Anything can be better than this.