



Militello, J. (2017) *From the maternal to the mechanical: the struggle against sentiment in contemporary American motherhood poetry*. PhD thesis, Bath Spa University.

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From the Maternal to the Mechanical:
The Struggle Against Sentiment in Contemporary American Motherhood Poetry

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A thesis submitted for partial fulfillment
of the requirements of Bath Spa University
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Humanities and Cultural Industries

January 2017

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the poems of a small number of contemporary American poets who have worked to undermine poetic traditions of sentimentality that have sometimes figured large in the representation of motherhood. The study focuses on writers who have been formative to my own practice and who have helped me consider a challenge that I have wrestled with in my own writing and personal life. I write about their practices in relation to my own creative project, and to a concern that the more challenging aspects of motherhood not be oppressed.

The first two chapters define idealism and sentimentality as factors that have been an important strand of motherhood poetry, explore the ways in which some contemporary American poets have sought to counter these factors in their work, and address the ways in which poets such as Sylvia Plath have examined the loss of maternal identity, which acts as precursor to the depersonalization of the mother in poetry. The thesis then investigates the depersonalization of the maternal figure by addressing the ways in which the mother can be mechanized and objectified in poems, and explores the objectification of the child in the work of several poets, showing how children have been embodied as objects in order to counter the culturally enforced response a child's presence engenders. These later chapters also explore some of the reasons a poet might objectify the mother and child figure, and address the effects of this approach. As a way of concluding each chapter, the study speaks to the creative manuscript and its contextualization, discussing the ways in which the research has influenced the writing of the poems. The creative portion of

the work is a manuscript of poems titled *The Reproduction Cinema*, which also addresses maternal struggle.

The study finds that the objectification and depersonalization of mother and child is one important method by which poets wishing to write against more traditional ideas of motherhood might do so. The conclusion suggests that this more inclusive version of a poetics of the maternal experience will help broaden the discourse around the poetry of motherhood.

Introduction

The struggle to avoid sentimentality and the idealization of mother and child opens a gulf in motherhood poetry that a number of American women poets work to fill. How are poets working to redefine this poetry in the wake of a rejection of sentiment and with an awareness of the dangers of idealization? How have certain traditions in motherhood poetry led to these approaches? In this thesis, I will examine the ways in which the objectification and depersonalization of both the mother and child in poems allow one group of American poets writing about motherhood to combat traditional literary pitfalls, including sentimentality and idealization. I will examine the techniques that a range of contemporary poets use in order to attempt successful poems in a climate of anti-sentiment. I will also define and examine the “Mechani-Mom” poem and the “Objecti-Child” poem, which treat the mother and child as objects, in effect depersonalizing or “mechanizing” both in order to open up emotional distance and speak expansively about the varied motherhood experience. I will look at those poets who have recognized that the depersonalization and mechanization of mother and child are useful devices in certain poems, and discuss how my own creative project contributes to this literary dialogue.

This thesis will begin with an exploration of the idealism and sentimentality that have traditionally influenced motherhood poetry and will discuss the poems of Anne Bradstreet and Sharon Olds as examples of poets from two very different periods whose work has influenced my own. It will identify ways in which several poets have sought to address or counter these factors in their work, as writers like Joy Katz and Sarah Vap have challenged the claim that sentiment in poetry is

inappropriate or ruinous, and others, like Rachel Zucker, have sought to represent the maternal struggle in poems rooted in realism. I will address how the loss of poetic identity of the mother can be a precursor to maternal depersonalization, and I will provide examples of poets such as Sylvia Plath and Mairéad Byrne who have explored the mother's loss of self. The thesis will go on to address the concepts of depersonalization of the mother in the work of Lara Glenum and Danielle Pafunda. I will consider the methods by which the mother is mechanized and objectified in their poems in order to relay more challenging aspects of the maternal experience through the creation of mechanical surrogates. I will show how children have been compared to and described as objects by such poets as Lia Purpura and Matthea Harvey. Finally, I will discuss the effects of these poems and the statements they make about the motherhood experience, and explore the methods used to make this species of poem effective and even extreme in its approach.

At the conclusion of each chapter, I will address *The Reproduction Cinema*, my creative manuscript. I will discuss the ways in which the contemporary maternal poem of depersonalization is represented in my manuscript, as well as the ways the research I have done has influenced the writing of those poems. As a writer who has grappled with the notion that negative feelings surrounding motherhood were not necessarily in keeping with acceptable attitudes about being a mother, I will consider the process of writing poems about the self-sacrifice and suffering caused by motherhood, and the ways in which these poems were fed by my experiences with the commiseration and gratitude expressed by other mothers when I related my own uncertainties. If I have struggled with the demands of motherhood, it seemed reasonable that I should write of the effort of motherhood rather than the joys. For this reason, I see myself as writing against poets such as Anne Bradstreet and

Sharon Olds to some extent, not only because I see in their work a sentimentality that in my view is not in the best interests of good poetry, but also because, to my thinking, this kind of poem does not adequately reflect experiential truths of motherhood.

While writing *The Reproduction Cinema*, I began with poems that were about the victimization of the mother, recognizing the loss of identity that can occur as a result of the sheer labor of motherhood. I also began to investigate the depersonalization of the mother and child, because, at least for me, this technique seemed a vital reflection of the challenges I was facing artistically and personally, and a strategy through which I could address it. The mothers and children of the poems became objects as a way of providing the distance required to examine an emotionally charged subject without succumbing to the pitfalls of sentimentality.

I felt ensnared by what I saw as a historically circumscribed discourse of motherhood and a pressure to only tell other mothers how much I loved being a mother. I wrote these poems in an attempt to challenge what I worried was an unspoken rule that mothers must love motherhood as unconditionally as they surely love their children. As Rachel Richardson has said in her essay “Mommy Poems; or Writing as the Muse Herself,” “Motherhood, though a wellspring of experience, has for a long time been considered somewhat taboo as a subject for serious poetry.”¹ In addition, it has also been difficult to write of motherhood in poems because of a fear that all subjects that point to one as female risk decreasing one’s worth as a poet,

¹ Richardson, Rachel ‘Mommy Poems; or Writing as the Muse Herself’. *Southern Humanities Review* Online Symposium, 2014. [Online] Available from: <http://www.southernhumanitiesreview.com/rachel-richardson--mommy-poems-or-writing-as-the-muse-herself.html> [Accessed 23 June 2014].

since the world of poetry, as evidenced most recently by VIDA's "Count,"² is still dominated so completely by male-dictated subjects and approaches.

Motherhood can, one would hope, be confronted in ways that do not idealize the experience or its subjects. Certainly, there are models for me to turn to for help with such a project. In her essay "Terribly Sentimental," published in *Pleiades*, Rachel Zucker refers to Alice Notley's poem "A Baby is Born Out of a White Owl's Forehead, 1972," quoting the last line, which reads, "but first, for two years, there's no me here." This line had a powerful resonance for me, as well as for Zucker, who states, "The sentiment was *true* and kept me afloat when I felt alone and lied to about how boring and soul-crushing it can be to raise young children."³ Stephen Burt has pointed out that

If you wanted to write about giving birth to children [in 1975]; reorganizing your life around them; nursing, feeding, or coming to understand them as they turn from infants into toddlers, preschoolers, and second graders, you had a disturbingly clear field: not that there were no poems about such experiences, but there were not enough, and of the wrong kind. The sentimental poetry of Victorian motherhood held few usable cues.⁴

The hopes for further literary exploration of the motherhood experience is clearly delineated here.

² Burgess, Claire "The 2014 VIDA Count". *The Rumpus*, April 10, 2015. [Online] Available from: <http://therumpus.net/2015/04/the-2014-vida-count/> [Accessed: 5 June, 2015].

³ Zucker, Rachel "Terribly Sentimental". *Pleiades*, 32 (1), 2012, pp.70-71.

⁴ Burt, Stephen "Smothered to Smithereens". *Boston Review*, January/February 2010. [Online] Available from: <http://new.bostonreview.net/BR35.1/burt.php> [Accessed 14 March, 2014].

Chapter One: The Obstacles of Sentiment and Idealism

In her essay “Baby Poetics,” poet Joy Katz addresses one of the dominant challenges in writing poems of motherhood: “A baby activates a set of cultural expectations that operates, in a poem, like subliminal advertising. For instance, babies are supposed to be wondrous. The fact that many people find them so, and that I am expected...to find them so, pressures the poem.”⁵ In her essay “Motherhood: Who Needs It?” Betty Rollin defines the motherhood myth as “[t]he idea that having babies is something that all normal women instinctively want and need and will enjoy doing.”⁶ And yet, as Rachel Richardson recognizes, “The experiences of pregnancy and motherhood are hugely altering—and these alterations make...poets intensely and newly alert to the world around (and within) them.”⁷ Poems that deal with motherhood have at times contributed to cultural pressures to idealize motherhood and treat it as a primarily positive experience, while leaving the darker corners of motherhood relatively unlit.

The history of motherhood and childhood is a complex one. An examination of this history can clarify the ways in which childhood has come to be idealized and pressure has been, in an increasingly conscious way, placed on mothers to deliver this ideal. Karin Calvert frames childhood by saying:

Members of any society carry within themselves a working definition of childhood, its nature, limitations, and duration...Parents deal with the disparity between the individual infant and the cultural ideal in numerous

⁵ Katz, Joy ‘Baby Poetics’. *American Poetry Review*, 42 (6), 2013, p.13.

⁶ Rollin, Betty ‘Motherhood: Who Needs It?’. *Look Magazine*, September 22, 1970, pp.15-17.

⁷ Richardson, Rachel ‘Mommy Poems; or Writing as the Muse Herself’. *Southern Humanities Review* Online Symposium, 2014. [Online] Available from: <http://www.southernhumanitiesreview.com/rachel-richardson--mommy-poems-or-writing-as-the-muse-herself.html> [Accessed 23 June 2014].

ways. They adopt the convention that their child is everything they believe it should be.⁸

In other words, “The little world parents create for their children reveals a great deal about the accepted place of children in the larger world.”⁹ Though the concept of childhood, Philippe Aries claims, was “invented” in the 17th century since “[i]n medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist,”¹⁰ according to Calvert, who disagrees with Aries, “the lack of manifest distinctions in any particular area is not evidence of a lack of recognized distinctions between different social groups... Ross Beales, for example, cites convincing evidence that Puritans in seventeenth-century New England were well aware of developmental differences between infants, youths, and adults.”¹¹ Calvert also states that Linda Pollock “finds considerable evidence that parents in every century studied had affection for their children, recognized various stages of development, disciplined but did not abuse, and worried about their offspring’s present and future well-being.”¹² Thus, Calvert concludes, “There should be enough evidence that there have always been loving parents, neglectful parents, and abusive parents to put that issue to rest.”¹³

Hugh Cunningham talks of evidence that, by the 1600’s, “mothers... teach their children to read and write.”¹⁴ By the 18th century, according to Cunningham, Rousseau is speaking of “[m]others’ blind love and indulgence of their children,”¹⁵ and “[i]n the 25 years from 1750 the death rate of aristocratic children under the age

⁸ Calvert, Karin *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992, p.3.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.5.

¹⁰ Aries, Philippe *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. New York: Vintage Books, 1962, p.128.

¹¹ Calvert, Karin *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992, pp.10-11.

¹² *Ibid*, p.12.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.12.

¹⁴ Cunningham, Hugh *The Invention of Childhood*. London: BBC Books, 2006, p.80.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.114.

of five dropped by 30 percent. The reason for this, it has been argued, is...because they spent more time with their mothers.”¹⁶ Marianne Noble points out that

Only at this time did motherhood become the primary signifier of plentitude, wholeness, and nurture. As many feminist historians have argued, in America this understanding of ‘mother’ is a historically contingent product of changes in family organization that swept across the nation between 1785 and 1815...The rise of industrial labor dramatically transformed the family structure. As increasingly men began to work outside the home in industry and the professions, child care became more and more the special province of women, and care on a paternal model or care shared by both parents yielded to a more exclusively female ‘mothering’.¹⁷

Hugh Cunningham speaks of the fact that Victorian Britain saw another shift in roles of mother and child: “Increasingly the middle-class home was separated from the workplace, and the wife and mother was left, or was free, to concentrate on domestic duties.”¹⁸ He speaks of the 1900’s, saying, “Mothers were castigated for their negligence and their untidiness”¹⁹ and that obedience and the “establishment of perfect regularity of habits” were emphasized. Cunningham also points to the fact that “[m]others marrying in the 1870’s had far more children than those born in the early twentieth century...the overriding cause seems to have been decisions by young mothers that they would try to avoid the ill health and the struggles that they had seen dominate the lives of their own mothers.”²⁰ Obviously, there were multiple reasons for this period’s decline in birth rate, such as increased awareness of birth control methods, but this quotation illuminates the cost of this role. Post-war, “mothers...were fully aware that a higher standard of living enabled them to look after their children in a quite different way from their own mothers” and “there was

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.114.

¹⁷ Noble, Marianne *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp.75-76.

¹⁸ Cunningham, Hugh *The Invention of Childhood*. London: BBC Books, 2006, p.142.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.198.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.203.

also a relationship between parents and children of a kind that could not have been imagined earlier.”²¹ Cunningham concludes, “There seems little doubt that children were behaving differently towards their parents than they had in previous generations, and that mothers, on whom the burden of parenting fell, were finding this often stressful. Mothers had almost certainly picked up from magazines or the radio some notion of the dangers of ‘maternal deprivation’ but found the level of commitment now expected wearing.”²² This signals the early influence of media on the motherhood role.

Contemporary motherhood is informed by this history, and has evolved from it. Yet conflicting literary and cultural forces have left those who want to write about motherhood in flux. It is difficult to imagine any motherhood experience that is not filled with feeling, however various the mix of feelings that constitute it may be. Yet we will see over the next few pages that there has for centuries been an aversion to sentimentality among literary writers, many of whom regard it as destructive to the merits of not just poetry, but other literary forms as well.

To say something was sentimental was once a form of praise, as “lively and effusive emotion [was] celebrated as evidence of a good heart.”²³ However, by 1795, Friedrich Schiller had declared the sentimental poet as one who “move[s] us through ideas” rather than nature and sensuous truth, and as “art divides and disunites him,” he is “infinitely inferior”²⁴ to the naïve poet, who is founded on reality. The sentimental poet was a cultivator of falsehoods who did not “remain sober enough,” and was prone to “exaggeration.” Thus, “it is now made clear, why

²¹ *Ibid*, pp.212-216.

²² *Ibid*, p.218.

²³ Ousby, Ian *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.845.

²⁴ Schiller, Friedrich, “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry,” *Poet of Freedom: Volume III*, translated by William F. Wertz, Jr., The Schiller Institute, Washington, DC, 2015.

these compositions...are completely satisfying neither to the heart nor the mind...They are just so ideal, that the representation loses individual truth thereby.” Schiller claims, “one has been quite right, to persecute with unrelenting mockery this evil of sentimentality.”²⁵

This persecution of the sentimental continued as time went on. By 1860, Henry Giles was writing in *Harper's*, “Satan, we are told, can clothe himself as an angel of light; and so vice, by sentimentalism, assumes the guise of virtue. The sentimentalist is to ethics what the hypocrite is to piety, a striver after falsehood.”²⁶ In her book *The Sentimental Reader: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of a Disparaged Rhetoric*, Faye Halpern begins her study of sentimentality by reframing the term as “sentimental rhetoric” and claims that it is most useful to think of it as “a set of textual strategies,” which suggests the extent of the bias present in readers against sentimentality. Halpern recognizes that “[s]entimental rhetoric strong-arms readers: it elicits a powerful emotional reaction from us, although not always the one it wants.”²⁷

According to Halpern, the sense of falsehood associated with sentimentality in literature originated with the disingenuous eloquence of professional orators. She states that “[o]rators have no real knowledge yet still sway their audiences” and points to the fact that the Rhapsode Ion said to Socrates, “if I set them weeping, I myself shall laugh when I get my money, but if they laugh, it is I who have to weep at losing it.”²⁸ It becomes obvious that bias against “[s]entimentality is motivated by the fear of deceit: an orator can seem as if he is trustworthy yet be motivated by self-

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Giles, Henry ‘Sentimentalism’. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 21 (122), 1860, pp.203-211.

²⁷ Halpern, Faye *Sentimental Readers: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of a Disparaged Rhetoric*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013, p.xxi.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.4-6.

interest. In that case, he will say what the listener wants to hear rather than what is true.” In addition, the fact that orators went through specific training in order to learn how to better evoke emotion highlights the potentially deceptive nature of their work: “where performing a certain gesture or striking a certain pose leads the actor to the appropriate emotion rather than the other way around... The gestures came to stand in for the emotion rather than express it.”²⁹ The fact that orators were trained to perform gestures and facial expressions meant to invoke certain emotion in the listeners translated to a form of emotional manipulation. The emotion was not real, and the orator’s speech was merely a form of acting. Halpern says that “as soon as sentimental rhetoric seems to be a product of learned behavior rather than the spontaneous outpouring of a full heart, it is open to charges of disingenuousness.”³⁰

Halpern also quotes Golden and Corbett, who claim that this training of orators “leads to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aspersions cast on rhetoric: rhetoric became associated with empty discourse and showmanship.”³¹ This distrust of rhetoric then translates to distrust of the use of sentiment in literature, especially for sentimental women authors of nineteenth-century America as they work to create a literature of the private sphere. Halpern claims that “the system collapses when we suppose that there is nothing natural about sentimental persuasiveness, that the picture that someone presents to the world might belie what he or she really feels. This belief coalesces in modern readers and leads them to cry hypocrisy,” as well as that, “For most critical readers, sentimental novels are less genuinely emotional than manipulatively sentimental.”³² Robyn Warhol, in her essay “As You Stand, So You Feel and Are: The Crying Body and the Nineteenth Century Text,” explains that “the

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp.80-81.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.86.

³¹ *Ibid*, pp.9-10.

³² *Ibid*, p.103.

sentimental novelist...relies on a set of ‘mechanical’ exercises to get the body of the reader into the pose that would generate real compassion, the pose of weeping.”³³

Halpern concludes her discussion by reflecting on the fact that “contempt for these nineteenth-century American women authors is not just widespread—it is enduring” and “[t]he idea of sentimental literature’s false aspect...has lingered into the present day.”³⁴

This condemnation of sentimentality is also present in the creative writing classroom as students are instructed in the techniques needed to write successful poems. Arthur Saltzman says of the sentimental poem in the context of the writing workshop, “It is poetry of the bland pronouncement and the unrealized assertion...It is poetry that treats nuance and tension as so much tundra to be cleared, so as not to obscure common sight, common sense. Worst of all, it is poetry purged of necessity, of urgency.”³⁵

The sense of sentimentality as a device of falsehood persists. In addition, the definition of what makes literature “sentimental” seems to have expanded to include two complementary elements: predictability and the expression of predominantly positive emotion. In “Reading the 19th Century, Writing the 21st,” Margaret Ervin, Joyce Hinnefeld, and Catherine Sustana cite a passage from a high school poetry textbook published in 1956:

If a poem is to have true excellence...it must exact a fresh response...not be merely imitative of previous literature nor appeal to stock, preestablished ways of thinking and feeling...A sentimental person is gushy, stirred to tears by trivial or inappropriate causes...Sentimental literature...depends on trite

³³ Warhol, Robyn ‘As You Stand, So You Feel and Are: The Crying Body and the Nineteenth Century Text’. In: *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation, and the Denaturalization of the Body in Culture*. Mascia-Lees, Frances E. and Patricia Sharpe eds. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, pp.100-125.

³⁴ Halpern, Faye *Sentimental Readers: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of a Disparaged Rhetoric*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013, p.141.

³⁵ Saltzman, Arthur ‘On Not Being Nice: Sentimentality and the Creative Writing Class’. *The Midwest Quarterly*, 44 (3), 2003, p.327.

and well-trying formulas for exciting emotion; it revels in...mother love, and the pitter patter of little feet.³⁶

This example, in particular, points to sentimentality as a tool commonly used in the portrayal of maternal subjects, as a way of conveying “mother love” and the behaviors of children.

Suzanne Clark, in *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*, says of the sentimental poem that the “...phrasing itself is predictable. There is both extreme conventionality and extreme fragmentation. All the resources of the page are summoned to heighten...the often declared insufficiency of words to express the feeling described.”³⁷ Saltzman also equates sentimentality with a familiarity, a lack of risk, and a predictability, saying that the sentimental poet “serves expectation with steadfast devotion,” creating a “predictable blur,” and that “students are...privileging familiarity over surprise.” He observes, “the sentimentality I regularly detect, and which I feel compelled to deconstruct piece by oily piece, is not very heartening. It is assumed, not achieved. Platitudes have pooled and been left to stand unattended for so long that they seem like convictions merely because they do not move much.”³⁸ He then goes further, saying,

Basically the problem is that students tend to be passionate according to formula, the result being that they are loath to be susceptible or to risk reactions along any but the most established paths. Because such fundamentalism—call it foaming on cue from the same faucet—is really a caricature of piety, it ends up denying them the range that living with poetry should occasion.³⁹

³⁶ Ervin, Margaret *et al.* ‘Reading the 19th Century, Writing the 21st’. *Legacy*, 15 (1), 1998, p.35.

³⁷ Clark, Suzanne *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, p.231.

³⁸ Saltzman, Arthur ‘On Not Being Nice: Sentimentality and the Creative Writing Class’. *The Midwest Quarterly*, 44 (3), 2003, p.327.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.324.

Mary Karr reinforces this expanded definition of sentimentality in “How to Read ‘The Waste Land’ So It Alters Your Soul”: “The terms of such poems are presumed to be agreed upon by the culture at large, so that from the first line you can easily predict the last and most moves in between. Sentimentalism is simply emotion that hasn’t been argued for or proven to a reader, only gestured to.”⁴⁰

In addition, the expression of extreme positive emotion seems at greater risk of being labeled “sentimental,” perhaps because of the historical precedent set by orators working to have an audience swayed by positive rhetoric. Rick Anthony Furtak, in his essay “The Poetics of Sentimentality,” says, “Sentimental emotion, since it needs to be tender, depends upon the representation of its objects as pleasant and ingenuous...From the point of view of the poet, what is at stake here is the difference between an accurate representation of the past and a revisionist history which alters one’s own emotional memories in order to ignore whatever does not arouse feelings of sweet tender sentimentality.” He explains that “this kind of distortion of the truth, for the sake of having the emotions one wants to have, is positively deplorable...Sentimental art does not present its objects as they are, but as a self-deceived Pollyanna would like them to be.”⁴¹ Furtak then clearly defines the dangers of sentimentality:

By making a habit of seeking certain emotions for their own sake without concern for justification, we end up numb to the conditions of justification and incapable of responding to new situations that *should* provoke emotion. In other words, if we cultivate tender emotion as a kind of delicacy while disregarding what it is *about*, we cut ourselves off from the sensitive experience that was the initial condition of any emotion at all.⁴²

⁴⁰ Karr, Mary ‘How to Read ‘The Waste Land’ So It Alters Your Soul’. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 23, 2001, p.B10.

⁴¹ Furtak, Rick Anthony ‘The Poetics of Sentimentality’. *Philosophy and Literature*, 26, 2002, pp.209-210.

⁴² *Ibid*, p.212.

How can a poet writing about motherhood deal with a subject so rich in sentiment, and express those felt responses, while being sure to meet the literary standard requiring that she avoid invoking too much? Amit Majmudar clarifies this contradiction by saying, “In the world of contemporary fiction, one of the biggest no-no’s is what goes by the name ‘sentimentality’” and “*sentimentality* will get you panned every time,” even as he admits, “mushy-gushy moments are an actual part of real lived life. Personal testimonial: There are things my son has said while his twin was in the hospital that are so over-the-top heartbreaking I simply cannot put them in a novel.”⁴³

The close ties between the emotional state of a mother and her child have been present in American poetry since its inception. Anne Bradstreet celebrated self-sacrifice and the causal link between her happiness and the happiness of her offspring in her poem “In Reference to her Children, 23 June 1659” when she said, “Great was my pain when I you fed, / Long did I keep you soft and warm,” and ended the poem with the lines “Farewell, my birds, farewell adieu, / I happy am, if well with you.”⁴⁴ Bradstreet also said of her role, “I nurst them up with pain and care, / No cost nor labor did I spare.” Abram Van Engen says of this poem, “the imperative to act properly has been wrapped up with the mother’s welfare...As the center of sentiment, the mother becomes the source of authority.”⁴⁵

Some might claim that, because of a historical context which includes the Puritan tradition and a high mortality rate for children, Bradstreet’s celebration of

⁴³ Majmudar, Amit ‘A Note on Sentimentality’. *Kenyon Review* blog, 2013. [Online] Available from: <http://www.kenyonreview.org/2013/03/a-note-on-sentimentality/> (Accessed 17 February 2014).

⁴⁴ Bradstreet, Anne *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*. Hensley, Jeannine ed. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1981, p.232.

⁴⁵ Van Engen, Abram ‘Advertising the Domestic: Anne Bradstreet’s Sentimental Poetics’. *Legacy*, 28 (1), 2011, p.59.

motherhood in her poems cannot be classified as sentimental. Yet Robert Hilliker calls Bradstreet's poems "performative," and says, "their focus is not on representing reality so much as producing it."⁴⁶ In "Advertising the Domestic: Anne Bradstreet's Sentimental Poetics," Van Engen claims that "[r]eading Bradstreet's poetry as sentimental opens it to new insights and expands our understanding of American literary history." Van Engen points out that "[h]er poetry...offers an early example of a woman strategically employing publicly sanctioned private roles to engage in cultural politics. Such activities emerge most clearly if we approach her work as...one possible opening in the development of a long sentimental tradition."⁴⁷ He speaks of Bradstreet as one of the first writers to use sentimentality as a literary device: "Anne Bradstreet's poetry...can be read profitably as...a precursor and early contributor to a long sentimental tradition...Bradstreet's later poems reveal the beginnings of elements that would eventually become essential to sentimental fiction."⁴⁸

Van Engen describes sentiment and sentimental writings as central to the Puritan experience in "Puritanism and the Power of Sympathy." He says, "Since the late sixteenth century, Puritans defined and employed sympathy in a variety of writings...enjoining it on followers as necessary to the godly life. The concept of fellow feeling...pervaded New England Puritanism and affected the shape of its literature."⁴⁹ Certainly, Anne Bradstreet was a writer of sentiment in a culture that valued sentiment and consciously made extensive use of it at the time. Van Engen

⁴⁶ Hilliker, Robert 'Engendering Identity: The Discourse of Familial Education in Anne Bradstreet and Marie de l'Incarnation'. *Early American Literature*, 42 (3), p.438.

⁴⁷ Van Engen, Abram 'Advertising the Domestic: Anne Bradstreet's Sentimental Poetics'. *Legacy*, 28 (1), 2011, pp.47-48.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.61.

⁴⁹ Van Engen, Abram 'Puritanism and the Power of Sympathy'. *Early American Literature*, 45 (3), 2010, p.533.

points out that “when Puritans turned sympathy into a doctrine and a duty, then, they did so within a broader culture that perceived feeling as vital for both good citizenship and virtuous action.”⁵⁰

One example of this centrality of sentiment was the fact that open weeping was used, and virtually required, to display and confirm loyalty: “A display of such emotion would prove the loyalty of New England Puritans... While reciprocated affections marked out members of an emotional community... it also separated that community from anyone who did not fellow-feel. Sympathy, in other words, served the Puritans not only as a duty but as a sign—a tool for determining who stood with whom.”⁵¹ C. John Sommerville also points out that “[c]hildren left a mark at every stage in the development of Puritan doctrine” and that “it is surprising to find that sympathy for children... caused Puritan theologians to lapse into an uncharacteristic inconsistency and uncertainty.”⁵² In addition, pivotal Puritan texts such as “The Humble Request,” which, according to Van Engen, “some scholars have tended to read... as something of a lie,” tend to “highlight... the sentimentality of the letter: the statement is overly emotional, to the point where the feeling cannot quite be believed.”⁵³ Van Engen says, “In order to achieve an affective response, therefore, Puritan preachers and writers like Hooke employed a methodology not unlike that of later sentimentalists: they attempted to have readers see and experience the sorrows of others *as if* they were their own.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p.534.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.545.

⁵² Sommerville, C. John *The Discovery of Childhood in Puritan England*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992, p.71.

⁵³ Van Engen, Abram ‘Puritanism and the Power of Sympathy’. *Early American Literature*, 45 (3), 2010, p.537.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.543.

Van Engen relates this cultural tendency directly to the use of sentimentality in Bradstreet's poems, saying, "Bradstreet demonstrates that sympathy must include a sign that can be seen, an appearance that moves the viewer," and "as Bradstreet's poem also demonstrates, affection could be stirred up through rhetorical techniques."⁵⁵ Thus,

long before Enlightenment philosophers detailed the power of sympathy, seventeenth-century Puritans embraced a similar notion and employed it in their literature. They did so, moreover, through some of the same tropes and techniques that would later identify literature as 'sentimental.' Sympathy, an integral aspect of eighteenth-century theories of sensibility, was not just a secular concept for the common good; it was also a biblical command for the godly community, affecting the shape of Puritan literature.⁵⁶

Some poets writing about motherhood today try to avoid viewing the poetic child primarily as an object of love and beauty, and work to present the poetic mother with a more comprehensive complexity. These poets must also take into account the tendency toward idealism that accompanies many discussions of motherhood. Rozsika Parker says in her book *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*, "How a mother feels about mothering—or the meaning it has for her—is heavily determined by such cultural representations of motherhood. These, I suggest, are becoming more static and idealized as the mobility of women's lives increases."⁵⁷ She goes on to clarify: "Jessica Benjamin has suggested that, in reaction to recent historical changes in modes of mothering, Western culture is under the sway of a sentimental idealization of motherhood: the ideal mother is 'an all-giving, self contained haven'."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, pp.547-552.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.553.

⁵⁷ Parker, Rozsika *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. London: Virago Press Ltd, 2005, p.2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p.28.

More recently, in *The Mommy Myth*, Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W.

Michaels speak of the “new momism”⁵⁹:

Central to the new momism, in fact, is the feminist insistence that women have choices, that they are active agents in control of their own destiny, that they have autonomy. But here’s where the distortion of feminism occurs. The only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first that you are a ‘real’ woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, is to become a ‘mom’ and to bring to child rearing a combination of selflessness and professionalism that would involve the cross cloning of Mother Theresa and Donna Shalala.⁶⁰

They describe the idealization of the motherhood role by explaining the ways in which “mothers and children in ads were pictured in poses that made the Virgin Mary in the pieta seem neglectful. Dazzling, toothy smiles about to burst into full throaty laughter defined the new characteristic pose of the truly engaged, empathetic mom as she hugged, held, nursed, and played with her kids, always with joyful spontaneity.”⁶¹ They continue:

But like increasing numbers of women, we are fed up with the myth— shamelessly hawked by the media—that motherhood is eternally fulfilling and rewarding, that it is *always* the best and most important thing you do, that there is only a narrowly prescribed way to do it right, that if you don’t love each and every second of it there’s something really wrong with you.⁶²

As Adrienne Rich observes in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the “calm, sure, unambivalent woman who moved through the pages of the manuals I read seemed as unlike me as an astronaut.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Douglas, Susan J. and Meredith W. Michaels *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*. New York: The Free Press, 2005, p.5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.5.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.18.

⁶² *Ibid*, pp.3-4.

⁶³ Rich, Adrienne *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, p.35.

Glenna Matthews points out that, when it comes to domestic expectation, “One who was unhappy was, in fact, the definition of not normal.”⁶⁴ Rozsika Parker explains, quoting writer and journalist Rosalind Coward, that “mothers berate themselves for failing to live up to the ideal, for it is founded on the belief that the really good mother is someone who ‘enjoys mothering so much that her enjoyment would override all the stresses and strains of family life,’”⁶⁵ and “Not only mothers in paid employment but all mothers have to negotiate their lived experience of motherhood with the maternal ideal. It is an indication of the oppressive effect of the ideal that we start to believe that some mother somewhere is managing to achieve it.”⁶⁶

There is of course much beauty and joy in the role of the mother. There is, however, no allowance for pain or stress when sentimentality and idealism place pressure on this role. There are honest and complex views of motherhood, but these must compete with the view fabricated and fashioned by magazines and movies. Certainly, there is much beauty in watching our children sleep or feeling them be born, but these varied and intense experiences are also filled with considerable hardship for many mothers.

Sharon Olds, one of America’s most well-known contemporary poets and a key figure in American motherhood poetry, could be regarded as a vivid example of the ways in which these cultural understandings continue to contribute to poetry of the maternal experience. Critics have argued that Olds perpetuates motherhood as a platform for both the sentimental and the ideal. Terri Brown-Davidson says that

⁶⁴ Matthews, Glenna *“Just a Housewife”: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p.211.

⁶⁵ Parker, Rozsika *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. London: Virago Press Ltd, 2005, p.46.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.41.

Olds' poems have "pumped up experience to such a heightened level it no longer resembles any reality a reader wants to participate in."⁶⁷ Alicia Ostriker says of Olds' treatment of motherhood, "Writing of her children, she concentrates on their living and imperiled flesh, which we see as it were suspended in the amber of the poet's locutions and her love."⁶⁸ Olds herself, during a Sarah Josepha Hale Award reading given in 2016, reflected on her work by saying of a recent period of time spent in New Hampshire, "In those eight years on Goose Pond Road, my poems changed. They became less idealized, less sentimental."⁶⁹ While a poet's statements about her own poems may not necessarily be considered definitive, it is clear that Olds continues to explore the possibility of sentimentality in her work.

Olds, it could be argued, idealizes the physical reality of the child as seen through the eyes of the mother. In her poem "Exclusive," a poem which emphasizes the speaker's inability to love those who are not her children, the daughter's skin is described as "biscuit-gold skin, glazed...like the surface of a biscuit."⁷⁰ In "Rite of Passage," she says, "My son, / freckles like specks of nutmeg on his cheeks, / chest narrow as a balsa keel of a / model boat, long hands / cool and thin as the day they guided him / out of me..."⁷¹ In a doubtlessly vivid series of images, it would seem that Olds is working to poeticize, if not beautify, the son by comparing his freckles to nutmeg, a spice romanticized through its use in apple pies and other desserts, and his chest to a balsa keel, with its clean shapeliness and flawless balance. Though the image of a boat does not communicate the softness or gentleness often expected

⁶⁷ Brown-Davidson, Terri "The Belabored Scene, the Subtlest Detail: How Craft Affects Heat in the Poetry of Sharon Old and Sandra McPherson". *The Hollins Critic*, 29 (1), 1992, p.4.

⁶⁸ Ostriker, Alicia "The Tune of Crisis". *Poetry*, 149 (4), 1987, p.235.

⁶⁹ Olds, Sharon *Sarah Josepha Hale Award Presentation*. Newport Opera House, Newport, NH, 1 October 2016.

⁷⁰ Olds, Sharon *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems, 1980-2002*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012, p.26.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.27.

when one speaks of a child, there seems to be an idealized sense of strength and purpose articulated here. “The Moment the Two Worlds Meet” includes a glamorized vision of childbirth that involves the memory of the baby’s movement from the body, the final exit whole and smooth, with the vision of the baby’s body emerging from the mother’s: “the arms, / bent like a crab’s cloud-muscle legs, the / thighs packed plums in heavy syrup.”⁷² The crab-like bending of the baby’s legs provides an accurate description of the angle and appearance of the legs, and though a crab is also spiny and sharp, this possible aspect of the comparison does not seem to be included in the metaphor’s scope. “Cloud-muscle” instead suggests an almost heavenly, ethereal softness. In addition, thinking of a baby’s legs during the experience of birth as something sugary and sweet and delicious, something syrupy and plum-shaped, a source of pleasure during such a painful event, detracts, it could be argued, from the visceral reality. The moment is also referred to as the “center of life” when the baby, described as a “juiced, bluish sphere”⁷³ emerges. Framing the moment of birth in this way seems predictable and overstated, in keeping with the very definition of sentimentality.

Though there is certainly ambivalence in Olds’ poems about motherhood, I would argue that there seems to be less ambivalence about the feelings of mothers for their children. In “Rite of Passage,” the speaker’s young son says, “We could easily kill a two-year-old,”⁷⁴ which sets up the potential for violence in the children, but this observation does not change the mother’s emotional state. In the poem “New Mother,” though Olds describes the act of giving birth as being “torn” and “cut with a knife and / sewn,”⁷⁵ she does so in order to construct a poem about

⁷² *Ibid*, p.52.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p.52.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p.27.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p.23.

romantic love; she talks of the act of giving birth in the context of lovemaking in this poem in order to give her speaker the opportunity to be healed by her partner, as “New Mother” is not primarily a poem about motherhood. “The Clasp” shows a mother expressing both impatience and anger as the speaker grips her daughter’s wrist, while ending by reflecting on the extremity of familial love. The poem makes use of the words “loved” and “love” three times in the final lines, and recognizes the mother’s complex response to the daughter as “near the source of love.”⁷⁶ In my view, Olds again sentimentalizes by naming what is perceived as a positive emotion while exploring feelings that are not, in fact, positive. This emphasis on positivity is, as Rick Anthony Furtak argues, a literary method employed to create “sweet tender sentimentality.”⁷⁷

Olds also seems to reinforce the idea that the mother may not exist but for her role as mother, and that her children in fact create her significance in the world. “Exclusive” portrays a mother’s love as worshipful: “I have loved you instead of anyone else, / loved you as a way of loving no one else, / every separate grain of your body.”⁷⁸ While the love presented in the poem is clearly a love that is consuming and destructive to others, the fact that the speaker loves “every separate grain” of the child’s body seems falsely rendered, a deliberate poeticization striving for dramatic effect. “Looking at Them Asleep” describes the physical beauty of two sleeping children, and ends with the sentiment, “oh my Lord how I / know these two. When love comes to me and says / What do you know, I say This girl, this boy.”⁷⁹ Extreme love is true to the maternal experience, and many who read these poems understandably respond to this portrayal of motherhood in Olds’ poems, but

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p.161.

⁷⁷ Furtak, Rick Anthony “The Poetics of Sentimentality”. *Philosophy and Literature*, 26, 2002, pp.209-210.

⁷⁸ Olds, Sharon *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems, 1980-2002*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012, p.26.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.55.

often an enforced positivity seems to outweigh the complexities of the mothering of children. Again, it could be said that these descriptions of love can minimize the dramatically volatile spectrum of maternal emotion and experience. Even “First Weeks,” a poem which directly addresses maternal ambivalence, ends by suggesting that a mother exists only through her child. Olds begins the poem by saying, “I don’t know if I knew / how to love our daughter.”⁸⁰ The description of the newborn shows the struggle of the mother to connect with her daughter; the speaker says the daughter looked “like a squirrel” and describes her shrieks as “a dream of a burn victim.” Yet there is a major turn in the poem when Olds states, “one day, she looked at me, as if / she knew me.” As a result of this suddenly awakened connection, which comes just weeks into the birth of the daughter, the speaker claims in the poem’s final line, “I fell in love, I became human.”⁸¹ This ending suggests that the speaker was not “human” until her daughter made her so. The fact that this love allows the speaker to “become” a person suggests that without motherhood, without having given birth, the woman would remain less than human, less realized and less real.

How are women who feel compelled to write about their experience of motherhood to do so without penalty when they have chosen a subject that does not fit comfortably into today’s literary expectations? Some of America’s contemporary writers of the motherhood poem have recognized these challenges and begun to confront them in their work. Because of the complex set of circumstances that have created these obstacles, the techniques used to combat them can have both poetic and political implications.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.159.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.159.

One technique utilized by contemporary poets of motherhood is realism. Relating unadorned details behind the maternal experience conveys a very different experience from the one portrayed in works which are colored by idealism or sentimentality, and can allow for the depiction of the motherhood experience in simple, everyday terms. Rachel Zucker's book, *Museum of Accidents*, makes use of this approach. In pieces that may seem more like diary entries or stream of consciousness rantings than poems, Zucker creates an almost photographic rendering of the daily life of the mother. Here, the maternal dynamic is not idealized, and the prevailing emotions are often anger and frustration. In the poem "Paying Down the Debt: Happiness," Zucker reproduces the litany of responses to the odd and minor questions children of a certain age put forth constantly, and is able to suggest the degree of mind-numbing energy required to simply interact and satisfy their interrogative curiosity:

*blueberries are blue but they're blue naturally, no I don't have blueberries because I didn't go to the grocery store and anyway they're not in season now, 'in season' means that fruits and vegetables grow at certain times of year and now it's March almost no berries grow this time of year, no I don't have strawberries, no yogurt doesn't have a season, look I'm going to go make dinner now, noodles, because that's what we have because I didn't go to the grocery store because I was writing.*⁸²

Later in the same poem, she grieves, "*The Muppet Show* is too singy. *The Jungle Book* is too quiet. *The Lion King* is too / loudly. The Super Friends are so boring. *Star Wars* is too fighty. He will not let / me. Sleep. Please, please, please, please."⁸³ Zucker's poems often seem a literal transcription of events, avoiding metaphor and description, and so moderating the placement of a poetic lens on the experience and giving women the ability to see motherhood for the struggle it can be. They deny

⁸² Zucker, Rachel *Museum of Accidents*. New York: Wave Press, 2009, pp.46-47.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p.49.

sentimentality and idealism by showing the complexities of the experience clearly and by rendering the everyday difficulties of motherhood.

In light of this, one might ask: how can the joy and affection essential to motherhood be explored? Some writers choose to defend sentiment as a legitimate tool for use in poems about the world of human interactions and emotions. Joy Katz, in her essay “When ‘Cold’ Poems Aren’t,” makes the claim, “Sentiment is sincere.”⁸⁴ She introduces a series of published essays on sentiment by saying, “Once upon a time, a long time ago, poets didn’t fear Feeling...and ‘sentimental’ was not a pejorative but a compliment.”⁸⁵ In this series, published in 2012 in *Pleiades* magazine, Sarah Vap claims, “as a woman if I speak about pregnancy and babies, I certainly risk being termed sentimental” even as she clarifies, “I have, for several years, found myself defending sentimentality’s presence and legitimacy in poetry...What might be termed ‘sentimental’—those subjects, feelings, scenarios—are also the exact reason why I write and read poetry.”⁸⁶ Jenny Browne references an interview Robert Hass carried out with her students at Trinity College and gives his explanation: “[T]he subjects most assumed to tug on heartstrings...entered literature at about the same time that people started taking care of their own children...Back then, calling someone sentimental would have been a compliment. Not any more.”⁸⁷ Rachel Zucker says in her essay, “Pregnancy and birth literally doubled and broke me open and split me into two selves” and “I wanted to write

⁸⁴ Katz, Joy ‘When ‘Cold’ Poems Aren’t’. *Pleiades*, 32 (1), 2012, p.84.

⁸⁵ Katz, Joy ‘A Symposium on Sentiment: An Introduction’. *Pleiades*, 32 (1), 2012, p.68.

⁸⁶ Vap, Sarah ‘Poetry, Belligerence, and Shame’. *Pleiades*, 32 (1), 2012, pp.73-75.

⁸⁷ Brown, Jenny ‘Call Me Sentimental’. *Pleiades*, 32 (1), 2012, pp.88-89.

experience in a way that felt accurate. I viewed sentimentality as the antithesis of accuracy.”⁸⁸

It is clear that sentiment is part of the motherhood experience, and that to exclude it is to treat the subject matter uncritically. But there is also a risk of perpetuating the idealist mythology of motherhood. Motherhood is a struggle as well as a celebration. Sentiment can be defended. Idealism can be deconstructed. These responses react to, and depend upon, the framework created by others, and work within the confines of our culture. Yet, the dialogue that happens in our literary forums should perhaps represent all facets of the experience in order to be considered comprehensive and complete.

When writing *The Reproduction Cinema*, I wanted to join those poets who worked to resist an idealized tradition in motherhood poetry. I valued poems that showed the complex nature of the maternal experience, poems that at times expressed sheer frustration and despair. As a mother, when I read more traditional motherhood poems, they seemed to reinforce in me an understanding of how and why sentimentality is frowned upon in literature and stand in league with the advertisements and articles on television and in magazines that were telling me that if I didn't feel mainly joy and satisfaction about the maternal experience, I had failed to meet the exacting standards of motherhood. I knew mothers who were struggling, and I knew this was at least partially caused by the insistence that child-rearing should only ever be a source of the kind of joy exemplified by the work of Sharon Olds. I felt that this poetry, in league with so many oppressive cultural messages, was doing women a disservice. As a result, I wanted to write poems that gave

⁸⁸ Zucker, Rachel "Terribly Sentimental". *Pleiades*, 32 (1), 2012, pp.70-71.

women permission to both experience and express more complex maternal responses.

This desire led to the first poems of the collection, the “Problems of the Mothers” sequence. These poems grew out of a feeling of overwhelming struggle and expressed the desperation I was feeling. I hoped to contribute my darker experiences to the larger poetic exchange in light of the fact that the definition of “sentimentality,” as stated, has come to mean not only an extremity of sentiment, but also an excess of positivity.

Many of the included poems present the mother as a victim. The experience of motherhood is portrayed as a negative experience which wreaks havoc on the maternal figure. The “In Praise of Offspring” poems present sardonic portraits of children who are behaving in ways that torment the mother more than delight her. There is meant to be true ambivalence when the speaker says of the children, “Praise the anarchy in their grip. Their fine hair.” “Sisyphian Labor” addresses the never-ending labors of motherhood as children’s demands become remorseless. “The Selves of Me Hang Like Bells Without Tongues” shows a mother who has been desiccated by the job of being a mother and who claims ironically at the poem’s end, in response to the cultural expectation that she see motherhood as a blessing, “What is it but joy. What else could it be.” There is also a recognition of entrapment, of an inability to escape this role. “Parenthood Anthem” ends with the realization that “Love prevails. It is a litany // of the laces we cannot bear to loose.” And in “The Pact,” the tables are turned. The speaker realizes that she has “destroyed” her own mother simply by being her child, even as she acknowledges that her mother has applied emotional pressure that has caused the speaker to become a mother herself.

The poem ends with the realization that “all the daughters [are] caught in their rows.”

Other poems explore the child as a force which inflicts damage on the mother. The offspring in these poems are not tender babies observed as they sleep in their cribs. The children in *The Reproduction Cinema* are “lungless animals...bring[ing] plague down with a word.” They starve their mothers by “eating like hatchlings from their mouths.” They vomit and cry and break and demand. They are relentless in their need.

The poems are often willfully blunt about the complexities of the experience and graphic in their treatment of the physical and emotional challenges present in the maternal reality. They transform both mother and child into a form of monster, so that, in their extremity, they might be more completely heard. The language and tone strive to deconstruct an arguably more pervasive view of motherhood. The approaches I explored in writing them began as an expression of my own personal despair. However, the pieces soon took on a broader purpose and I began to see my voice as a vehicle for more than just myself. Women have often been lulled by the songs of successful motherhood, and perhaps the traumas of my own experience might, I hope, touch upon and reinforce the experience of others.

Chapter Two: Loss of Identity and Depersonalization of the Mother

Anne Bradstreet wrote of the intertwined emotional fate of mother and child. Relatedly, the conflict which the bond between mother and child creates within the mother, as she struggles to keep a self separate from the children intact, has been extensively explored by more recent poets. Sharon Olds recognizes this conflict in her poem “The Clasp,” when she says of a daughter’s realization of her mother as an entity separate for the first time, “Her dark, / deeply open eyes took me / in, she knew me, in the shock of the moment / she learned me.”⁸⁹ Here, the daughter becomes aware of the autonomous self underneath the mother-self, and thus sees the mother she knows, and “learns” an additional mother in the moment the poem describes. Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, says of the mother-self, “Unexamined assumptions: First that a ‘natural’ mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children...that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless.”⁹⁰ She also says of her own experience, “I would feel the futility of any attempt to salvage myself, and also the inequality between us: my needs always balanced against those of a child, and always losing.”⁹¹ This is very much in keeping with Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels’ claim that, according to societal expectation, “The best mothers always put their kids’ needs before their own, period...For the best mothers, the kids are the center of the universe.”⁹² Dan Chiasson shows the presence of this exact

⁸⁹ Olds, Sharon *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems, 1980-2002*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012, p.161.

⁹⁰ Rich, Adrienne *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, p.45.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.23.

⁹² Douglas, Susan J., and Meredith W. Michaels *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*. New York: The Free Press, 2005, p.5.

conflict in the poem “mindful” in Rachel Zucker’s collection *The Pedestrians*, by explicating the lines, “inside I run & running / then a snowstorm so no school I cried...I used to long for snow,”⁹³ by saying, “Somewhere Zucker remembers the prior self who longed for snow, now a terrified parent who must engineer a day for her children using cocoa and coercion.”⁹⁴ This kind of thinking, and this kind of poetry, made me realize that I was not alone, as a mother or as a writer.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum states that a person is objectified if they are treated “as a tool for another’s purposes,” “as if there is no need for concern for their feelings and experiences,” and “as if permissible to damage or destroy.”⁹⁵ Rozsika Parker says, referring to Michael Balint’s theory of the existence of “primary love” early in life, “The idealization of a symbiotic, conflict-free connection is described exclusively from the child’s position in that the mother is either gratifying or frustrating, rejecting or facilitating. Hence, the impression exists that mothers lack subjecthood: they are just the child’s object.”⁹⁶ It might be said that children, who are not self-conscious moral agents, cannot objectify, and yet the ways in which a child must make use of a mother in a practical way, whether consciously or not, does make the mother a “tool” in this sense. Betty Friedan, in her groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique*, makes reference to women as objects several times when discussing the identity dilemma of the American mother. She quotes a nineteen-year-old daughter who says of her mother, “My mother’s like a rock that’s been smoothed by the waves, like a void. She’s put so much into her

⁹³ Zucker, Rachel *The Pedestrians*. New York: Wave Books, 2014, pp.83-84.

⁹⁴ Chiasson, Dan ‘Mother Tongue: Poetry and Prose by Rachel Zucker’. *The New Yorker*, June 2, 2014. [Online] Available from: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/06/02/mother-tongue-4> [Accessed 4 August 2015].

⁹⁵ Nussbaum, Martha C. *Sex and Social Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.25.

⁹⁶ Parker, Rozsika *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. London: Virago Press Ltd, 2005, p.43.

family that there's nothing left, and she resents us because she doesn't get enough in return.”⁹⁷ Speaking of the work of women to undo the idealized expectations of the culture that objectified them in the 1950's, she observes, “The problem of identity was new for women then, truly new. The feminists...had to prove that women were human. They had to shatter, violently, if necessary, the decorative Dresden figurine that represented the ideal woman of the last century. They had to prove that woman was not a passive, empty mirror, not a frilly, useless decoration, not a mindless animal...”⁹⁸

The ways in which some of today's motherhood poems grapple with issues of maternal identity are perhaps most clearly rooted in and influenced by the poems of Sylvia Plath. Plath makes use of the mechanical and objectified while exploring the loss of an autonomous self. The conflict and struggle come clear in poems like “Morning Song” and “Brasilia” as Plath explores the ways in which the mother is a machine, cursed by the need to be super-human, and by the invasion of the body and larger self by the child. “Morning Song” is perhaps Plath's most well-known motherhood poem. Tasha Whitton says of the piece, “the mother of ‘Morning Song’ must address the question of the reestablishment of her self following the birth of her child...The mother feels completely isolated from her child, as if s/he were a machine that has been set into motion. The baby is a mechanical thing, ‘a fat gold watch,’ which can only suggest that the mother is also an apparatus.”⁹⁹ Though this does simplify Plath's lines to some extent, Whitton makes a valuable point about one aspect of the piece. In addition, Whitton does acknowledge that this line also

⁹⁷ Friedan, Betty *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, pp.413-415.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p.138.

⁹⁹ Whitton, Tasha ‘Sylvia Plath: A Search for Self,’ *Women Writers*, Winter 2004. [Online] Available from: <http://www.womenwriters.net/editorials/whitton0500.htm> [Accessed 23 June 2014].

holds admiration and affection, stating, “[t]he feelings that she captures in this poem are not meant to suggest that the mother dislikes the infant but rather that she is confused by the mechanical quality surrounding it.”¹⁰⁰

Plath states in the poem, “We stand round blankly as walls. // I’m no more your mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind’s hand.”¹⁰¹ These lines express distance from self and from child. The machine-like response of “blankness” suggests that her emotional state is as abstract and ethereal as a cloud in wind. According to Matt Dubois, “the speaker exhibits a consciousness that through the act of becoming a mother, she becomes something not herself... Thus, the speaker’s identity suffers its ‘slow effacement at the wind’s hand;’ the nebulous cloud of her individuality is dissipated by the obligations of motherhood.”¹⁰² Jemma L. King makes the presence of depersonalization clear when she says of the poem, “The mother’s voice ‘echoes,’ she becomes ‘blank’ as a reflection of a cloud; she becomes a museum—a container of death and outmoded objects; and finally she loses her autonomy in favour of the child’s demands.”¹⁰³

When Plath says, “I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown,”¹⁰⁴ she refers to the fact that the maternal body is unfamiliar, and difficult to pilot. She portrays it as heavy, unattractive, strange, and undesirable, as well as something non-human, bovine in nature. In addition, as pointed out by Dubois,

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Plath, Sylvia *The Collected Poems*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1981, p.156.

¹⁰² Dubois, Matt ‘Sylvia Plath: An Elegy for the Loss of the Self’. Yahoo Contributor Network, March 22, 2007.

¹⁰³ King, Jemma L. ‘Red Earth, Motherly Blood: Articulating Sylvia Plath’s Anxieties of Motherhood’. *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies*, Vol. 4, 2011. [Online] Available from: <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/article/view/4438> [Accessed 23 June 2014].

¹⁰⁴ Plath, Sylvia *The Collected Poems*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1981, p.156.

Plath's choice to describe the nightgown of the speaker as 'Victorian' is not accidental, but, instead, further reveals her attitude toward mothering. The Victorian era was one of staunch patriarchal values, and left virtually no room for women to foster individuality or creativity. Women served as wives and caretakers of children, and were consigned to their role without hope of change. Correspondingly, the nightgown serves as an exterior manifestation of the speaker's newly assumed role as a mother, with its accompanying restraints and limitations.¹⁰⁵

This use of the term "Victorian" is also a seeming reference to the popular Victorian image of the ideal wife, the "angel in the house," from Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House." The angel in the house, according to Aihong Ren, "was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The angel was passive, meek, charming, graceful, gentle, self-sacrificing, pious, and...has a preference for a life restricted to the home."¹⁰⁶ Thus, "Morning Song" portrays, among its many complexities, the maternal self as an ineffective and oppressed alien being.

"Brasilia" is another of Plath's motherhood poems, as well as another of her "mirror" poems; according to Ida Kodrlová and Ivo Čermák, "In the last 4 months of her life the word 'mirror' appears in 8 out of 20 poems with its occurrence increasing towards February, when she killed herself,"¹⁰⁷ suggesting an increase in issues of identity in her work as she also grappled with motherhood and its complexities. In this poem, the new capital of Brazil is paralleled with the difficulties of motherhood. Plath speaks of the fragile new city and of the trouble in realizing that city's potential. She references the old life meeting the new life and replacing it, and the conflict inherent in that transition. With the lines "And my baby a nail / Driven, driven in. / He shrieks in his grease // Bones nosing for distance. /

¹⁰⁵ Dubois, Matt 'Sylvia Plath: An Elegy for the Loss of the Self'. Yahoo Contributor Network, March 22, 2007.

¹⁰⁶ Ren, Aihong 'A Fantasy Subverting the Woman's Image as "The Angel in the House"'. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4 (10), 2014, pp.2061-2065.

¹⁰⁷ Kodrlová, Ida, and Ivo Čermák *Precursors to Suicide in Life and Works of Sylvia Plath and Sarah Kane*. Institute of Psychology, Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic, 2005.

And I, nearly extinct,”¹⁰⁸ Plath speaks of the baby as a sharp and painful object, one that creates such a noise that the self of the speaker-mother is almost destroyed. The baby is large, overwhelming, machine-like in his “grease,” moving forward in a mechanical way. As a result, the “I” of the poem is presented as one practically consumed by the largeness of the sound and presence of the child.

When the poem continues with the lines “In the lane I meet sheep and wagons, / Red earth, motherly blood. / O You who eat // People like light rays, leave / This one / Mirror safe,”¹⁰⁹ whether the speaker is pleading for the sparing of a mirror as a single way she is able to see herself, or for her child as a form of mirror, the threat is made clear. Plath again partners the city and motherhood by asking that each not be corrupted by an expectation of greatness. According to Gina Hodnik, “Plath first identifies herself as a mother, telling the reader that ‘[her] baby’ has ‘driven’ his nail in her thumb. However, Plath then claims that she is ‘nearly extinct’; her identity as a mother fades [and]...she remains ‘one mirror safe’; she continues to reflect others, as a mirror does, and does not get a chance at rebirth.”¹¹⁰

Jemma L. King articulates this machinery of the mother experience when she says,

Within this context, we can see that Plath’s poetic speaker is concerned not with the emotional processes of being a mother, but with the mechanical processes of the body and mind. The production and output is akin to a factory line that ingests matter at one end, only to assemble the pieces into an independent working object at the other. The metaphor of the body as a machine serves to remove emotion from the scene, and instead references the baby as an unfeeling parasite that exists to succeed the host body...¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Plath, Sylvia *The Collected Poems*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1981, p.258.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p.258.

¹¹⁰ Hodnik, Gina ‘Early Public Representations of Sylvia Plath: An Analysis of the Sylvia Plath Issue of The Review’. *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies*, Vol. 3, 2010. [Online] Available from: <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/article/view/4686> [Accessed 23 June 2014].

¹¹¹ King, Jemma L. ‘Red Earth, Motherly Blood: Articulating Sylvia Plath’s Anxieties of Motherhood’. *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies*, Vol. 4, 2011. [Online] Available from: <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/article/view/4438> [Accessed 23 June 2014].

In contrast, Plath's letters home portray the "ideal" sense of motherhood—describing Frieda "sleeping sweetly after her 2 p.m. feeding, her little hands in the most delicate attitudes...I have begun changing her diapers myself now and enjoy it immensely. She is very good and quiet..."¹¹²

Plath's work seems to have been a direct influence on contemporary poets such as Mairéad Byrne as they objectify and mechanize the mother figure. Byrne addresses the loss of identity in her poem "Downtown Crossing," a poem coordinated as a list of objects that can stand in for a mother. There is a mechanical repetition and parallelism to its construction, so that the items listed and the poem itself feel like a series of cogs in a wheel; in this way, the very structure of the poem embodies objectification. The piece seems set on a track or cord that compels it forward, in a regular, stiff fashion; it moves the way we imagine a robot might walk. The objects do have in common a certain ability to be of comfort: the poem begins, "A cup of coffee can be a mother. / A cigarette can be a mother,"¹¹³ listing a few commonly used and addictive calming devices. She then moves on to warmth: "A wool cap can be a mother. / A coat can be a mother...A warm grating can be a mother."¹¹⁴ The list builds a relentless sense of the way the mother can be replaced by any machine or object that can provide the same sense of security and caretaking that a mother figure affords. This last item counters the warmth of the others because it becomes clear that the speaker is referencing homelessness; the warm grating is unmistakable. Despite this specific reading—confirmed by the fact that

¹¹² Plath, Sylvia *Letters Home, Correspondence 1950-1963*. Plath, Aurelia S. ed. New York: Harper Row, 1975, p.47.

¹¹³ Wolff, Rebecca et al. eds. *Not for Mothers Only: Contemporary Poems on Child-Getting and Child-Rearing*. Albany: Fence Books, 2007, p.213.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.213.

“Downtown Crossing” is the title—a commentary about the mother is present as well. When traded in for these objects, the mother is seen as distant and disposable.

As Byrne again depersonalizes the mother in her poem “Inventions: The Handy Everymother Zone-Out Capacitator,” written in the form of an advertisement for an invention that can “pump out standard mother issue ‘I Don’t Know’ responses every 15 seconds,” she describes a device built to deal with “the child’s stream of steady questions” and to free the mother from “numbness, feelings of uselessness & endemic ignorance & the sense of being tethered to a stump when all she wants is to rise into the blue ether.”¹¹⁵ This acknowledgment of the mindless, repetitive experience of motherhood is humorous and blunt, shedding light on the loss of self caused by constant, demanded interaction. This device is supposedly able to satisfy “the child’s ongoing need for attention, reassurance, and news from the kingdom of adults.”¹¹⁶ There are “tones” of voice that mothers would use including “Honey,” “Brusque,” and “Playful,” and “Periods of Non-Response” to “mimic real life.” In italics: “Your child will not be unnerved by any sense of robotic or unmommylike response.”¹¹⁷

The use of a robot to replace the functions of a mother effectively calls attention to the automated nature of the role, and thus illustrates how this role transforms the mother into an object or machine. The use of the robot also exposes the ways in which the mother’s individual self ceases to be cared for, and how the need to constantly be on call, and respond, can be a destructive force. This is emphasized even further by the final “Testimonial” of the poem: “I’m a moral

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.214.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.214.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.214.

theologian so occasionally need some decompression time. The Handy Everymother Zone-Out Capacitator allows me to collect the twins from school without being scared my head will break’ –Sandy, Fall River.”¹¹⁸ These lines present an intelligent, hardworking mother trying to find a way to cope with the demands of motherhood, to find a relief from the mind-numbing interactions that begin once her children are in her presence, and the danger, should she not be able to do this, is that her “head will break.” In other words, she will go crazy or die, she will “want...to rise into the blue ether,” because her job as mother is one that demands that she put aside her professional, personal, and intellectual life. This poem expresses the fact that the two lives are incompatible and impossible to reconcile without the mother cutting off emotions and becoming a machine.

Maternal loss of identity is addressed in my creative manuscript, *The Reproduction Cinema*. The poem “Domestic Metrology” introduces a confusion caused by the complexity of female roles. The unidentified speaker states, “Bride of mine, you are also my child,” so that the wife, also a mother figure, is additionally put in a child’s role. Thus, the mother is belittled and subjugated in her role as bride or married woman. The phrase “Bride, you are my husband” suggests that the identity is confused yet again and that the woman is married to and enslaved by herself, perhaps suggesting that her own choices to become a wife and mother have trapped her. The makeup of the mother-speakers is dealt with repeatedly in the book. “Slaughter is a Parable” begins, “Strip down the fat and I am flesh. / Strip down the wool and I am want.” In this poem, submerged materials are presented as real and raw, but must be hidden, since it is out of keeping with the mother paradigm.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.214.

“Flesh” and “want” are concealed by the more stagnant, more domestic, “fat” and “wool.” Later in this same poem, the mothers claim, “When the faces wane like moons, we are lost, / when the brands blacken us and we are ash.” The children’s faces growing pale, suggesting a loss of health, affects the mothers deeply, making them not only unhealthy on the surface themselves, but rendering them “lost,” without direction, without identity. The “brands” in the poem, much like the brands on a cattle ranch, as the permanent and inescapable rattle of motherhood, not only mark the mothers and burn them, but leave them spent and turn them entirely to ash, the bi-product of burning. The brand is the irreversible mark of ownership. “The Pact” reverses this dynamic, and in this poem the daughter, as speaker, states, “Mother, I have destroyed you. Forgive me as I am / destroyed.” In this poem, the daughter acknowledges that her own childhood demands annihilated her mother, and that she as a mother will now suffer the same fate. The final lines recognize that this is a fate handed down from mother to daughter repeatedly, that daughters can entrap their mothers by needing to be cared for as children and mothers often entrap their daughters by teaching them that they are expected to have children just as all “good” women do: “Mother, mother, quite contrary, how does your deadliness / grow? With a tooth and a rack and a crow and a sack / and all the daughters caught in their rows.”

“Amnesia District,” a poem where the title itself suggests the loss of identity caused by a deficiency in memory associated with motherhood, allows the speaker-mother to claim, “I am less. It is lethal. I am lost.” Similarly, in “Household Psalm” the mother states, “I am stifled. I am fake.” She is translated into something false and submerged by her maternal duties. Perhaps the most significant examples of her objectification occur in “The Problems of the Mothers” sequence. The collective

nature of the mothers in these poems results in an erasure of identity, and creates a sense of the mother as one of a group that struggles together: “The mothers clustered together, though they were alone.” Their togetherness does not necessarily alleviate their isolation. They are erased by all they fall victim to: they starve, they develop ulcers, they are broken, they are hurt. Their “shoes collected cobwebs in the corners...The sleeves drooped and grew used to being empty. The pockets filled with soot.” All of this happens at the hands of their children, who consume until the mothers are spent. They are undone by their inability to give enough: “What the mothers didn’t know repeatedly hurt them.” They are nameless and selfless, they are “leaning in supermarkets and...panicking in the convenience stores and...taking toddlers by the wrists in the gift shops with the fragile figurines.” The identity of the mothers is decided upon by their children. The nature of motherhood renders them selfless until “[e]very second of sleep seemed like running someplace unfamiliar. Every word pronounced knew a different word by name.” In the manuscript’s final poem, the mothers are so devastated by motherhood that they cannot even weep: “When they tried to weep, the mothers conjured a dry scrape in the apex of their throats.” Finally, they are no longer human: “The mothers. There were no mothers. There were machines.”

Chapter Three: The Mechani-Mom Poem

The line from my poem “The Problems of the Mothers,” “There were no mothers. There were machines,” might serve as an appropriate introduction to a discussion regarding the ways in which a poet may adopt a more literal poetic mechanization of the mother in order to convey the extreme depersonalization that can be part of the maternal experience. Faced with the need to reflect upon the varied perceptions of motherhood, a poet might explore the objectification of women in order to expand upon a loss of identity expressed in some motherhood poems. By calling attention to and exaggerating this objectification traditionally inflicted on womankind, these poems might convey the crushing reality of the domestic everyday.

The “Mechani-Mom” poem continues the poetic dialogue about ambivalence in motherhood by exploring the effects of objectification in the maternal sphere. A machine is by its very definition lifeless and soulless, but the Mechani-Mom is also built in service to others. In a Mechani-Mom poem, the mother is converted into a machine for making and raising babies, as well as caring for the basic needs of others. She encapsulates the fact “that a ‘natural’ mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children...that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless.”¹¹⁹ This poem replaces the maternal self with an engine that is seeded with pods, impregnated, at times against her will or desire, and then set up to sacrifice for the child’s perpetual

¹¹⁹ Rich, Adrienne *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., p.45.

demands. The mother is often falsified, made of plastic and wire, and is seen performing acts that dull the consciousness and require an almost super-human denial of self-need. She is a contraption in these poems, which is both a reflection of her deadened mental and emotional state and of the fact that her body has been usurped and mechanized as it serves the needs of others without seeming to have its own.

The mother figure in the Mechani-Mom poem is also often made animalistic as a way of further dehumanizing her. This metaphoric use of the animal has a long history in literature, and need not always point to a problematic hierarchy damaging to animals. As Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence states when speaking of the use of the animal metaphor in poetry, “In poetic terms, animals may take on human qualities and humans may take on animal qualities.”¹²⁰ Jennifer Mason speaks of the use of animal metaphor in sentimental literature, showing how it has been used to highlight control over women, pointing to the fact that “Ellen’s development in *The Wide, Wide World* [by Susan Warner] tracks onto the way she is figured through equine metaphor” and claiming that, “Since the influence exerted in the saddle mirrored the influence that women were to exercise over their families, good riding trained women to be good mothers.”¹²¹ Mason also speaks of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s use of animal metaphor, saying, “Stowe’s language of animality—informed by such diverse sources as natural history, animal welfare, and her own lifelong experiences with animals—enabled her to eschew any simple dichotomy between nature and nurture and to transform potentially oppressive comparisons between people and

¹²⁰ Lawrence, Elizabeth Atwood ‘Seeing in Nature What Is Ours: Poetry and the Human-Animal Bond’. *Journal of American Culture*, 17 (4), 1994, p.47.

¹²¹ Mason, Jennifer *Civilized Creatures: Urban Animals, Sentimental Culture, and American Literature, 1850-1900*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005, pp.38-43.

animals into a key component of her broadly aimed program of societal reform.”¹²²

Mason also references the fact that Descartes “advanced his claim about the mechanical nature of animal life by comparing animals to the automated birds produced by French engineer Salomon de Caus,” thus arguing that this type of animal/machine comparison need not devalue the animal. Mason shows us how

Stowe

picks up Descartes’ comparison of birds to machines and deploys it for different ends. After Jamie’s mother observes him throwing stones at birds for sport, she calls him into the house and shows him a music box. Jamie is fascinated to learn that birds possess far more complex, and far smaller, instruments in their throats through which they produce music more beautiful than that of any music box. Jamie’s mother proceeds to describe a bird’s optical, neurological, and skeletal structures as various kinds of intricate machinery wrought by God.¹²³

Donna Haraway points to this use of hybridization and metaphor as well, saying, “One of my premises is that most American socialists and feminists see deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the social practices, symbolic formulations and physical artefacts associated with ‘high technology’ and scientific culture.”¹²⁴

As some poets seek to contribute to the dialogue surrounding motherhood in innovative ways, they are counting on the fact that a poem that takes culture’s sacred mother figure and transforms her to a machine will, to some extent, offend sensibilities. This is conscious, political iconoclasm. The poems reflect feminist discussions about hybrids and cyborgs, such as those of Haraway, who says, “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.” She points out that “[I]ate twentieth-

¹²² *Ibid*, p.96.

¹²³ *Ibid*, p.101.

¹²⁴ Haraway, Donna *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Free Association Books, 1991, p.296.

century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body...Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.”¹²⁵ Haraway speaks of the cyborg as a way to redefine the roles of a social reality, saying, “Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recording communication and intelligence to subvert command and control.”¹²⁶ She claims that one of the benefits of the cyborg is its ability to challenge the phallogocentric reality of control: “It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine... The cyborgs populating feminist science fiction make very problematic the statuses of man or woman, human, artefact, member of a race, individual entity, or body,” and points out that “[c]yborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia... It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships.”¹²⁷ The *Mechani-Mom* poem, as a poem of the hybrid, a poem of the cyborg, can call cultural norms into question in order to explore the less positive aspects of motherhood.

The *Mechani-Mom* poem can also be a poem detailing the loss of ownership and autonomy of the physical body. The bodily self is in some cases usurped, captured, and made use of in these poems, in order to explore mechanized selflessness as one aspect of motherhood. Rozsika Parker made use of interviews while working on her book in order “to find a format that could stress the position of mothers as autonomous, changing and developing subjects, rather than as their

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, pp.293-294.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p.311.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, pp.313-316.

children's 'objects'." ¹²⁸ Adrienne Rich also provides context for this physical usurping of the mother in *Of Woman Born* when she says, while speaking about birth control,

[T]here has always been, and there remains intense fear of the suggestion that women shall have the final say as to how our bodies are to be used. It is as if the suffering of the mother, the primary identification of woman *as* the mother—were so necessary to the emotional grounding of human society that the mitigation, or removal, of that suffering, that identification, must be fought at every level. ¹²⁹

Thus, the *Mechani-Mom* poem also calls up the battles women have fought over reproductive rights. Karyn Valerius refers to the “contemporary abortion debate, which articulates a conflict of interest between a pregnant woman and the fetus she is carrying” and points out that, “[i]n American culture, female bodies penetrated, inhabited, subsumed, or otherwise ambiguated by another are not unthinkable or even unusual, and the abortion debate has made the fetal personhood conundrum a familiar one.” ¹³⁰ Joan Haran, in her essay “Simians, Cyborgs, and Women in ‘Rachel in Love,’” states, “feminists engaged with medical technoscience have noted the ways that women’s bodies are erased or made transparent in the rhetoric and visual imagery used by fetal rights advocates, with material effects on the choices that women can make about abortion.” ¹³¹ Donna Haraway also comments on these conflicts, saying, “Among the many transformations of reproductive situations is the medical one, where women’s bodies have boundaries newly

¹²⁸ Parker, Rozsika *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. London: Virago Press Ltd, 2005, p.11.

¹²⁹ Rich, Adrienne *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, p.30.

¹³⁰ Valerius, Karyn ‘The Monstrous Genealogy of Assisted Reproduction’. In: Kaplan, E. Ann and Susan Squier eds. *Playing Dolly: Technocultural Formations, Fantasies, & Fictions of Assisted Reproduction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999, p.180.

¹³¹ Haran, Joan ‘Simians, Cyborgs, and Women in ‘Rachel in Love’’. In: Larbalestier, Justine ed. *Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006, p.254.

permeable to both ‘visualization’ and ‘intervention’. Of course, who controls the interpretation of bodily boundaries in medical hermeneutics is a feminist issue.”¹³²

Lara Glenum’s book *The Hounds of No* frequently presents a version of the mechanical mother figure. With reproduction as a central theme to the book, and emphasis on the “meat” body as an object, *The Hounds of No* presents childbearing as an invasive and violent process told in visceral, gory detail, and builds an awareness of the larger political and social issues surrounding the act and its relationship to women and their cultural status. James Pate says in his article “Wittgenstein, Deleuze, and the Political Grotesque,” “Rage, in Glenum’s book, is not to be feared; it is embraced and sometimes made oddly jubilant.”¹³³ Glenum’s constant references to the body as an object works to limit the extent to which sentiment might cloud the perception of a mother figure, as Glenum examines the varied political and personal expectations placed upon the mother, and the ways in which she is inevitably consumed by this array of conflicting factors.

Jasper Bernes says in his review of the book, “For some readers familiar with psychoanalytic and feminist theory, Glenum’s performance, again and again, of a besieged and harrowed female body will seem a way of mastering the objectifying violence done to women—here marked by mannequin legs and dolls and other objects.”¹³⁴ The poems speak of “[t]he Mother-body’s spare plastic parts”¹³⁵ and present the revered but objectified mother as a preserved saint, listing, again, her parts: “A pair of dried-out ovaries dipped in gold / A necklace of teeth,”¹³⁶ as well

¹³² Haraway, Donna *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Free Association Books, 1991, p.306.

¹³³ Pate, James ‘Wittgenstein, Deleuze, and the Political Grotesque’. *Action Yes Quarterly*, 1(120, Winter 2010. [Online] Available from: <http://actionyes.org/issue6/pate/pate1.html> [Accessed 8 July 2014].

¹³⁴ Bernes, Jasper ‘Revulsion as Revolt’. *Jacket Magazine*, Issue 29, April 2006. [Online] Available from: <http://jacketmagazine.com/29/bernes-review.html> [Accessed 8 July 2014].

¹³⁵ Glenum, Lara *The Hounds of No*. Notre Dame: Action Books, 2005, p.41.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, p.39.

as “A pelvic bone [ground into a fine cosmetic powder],” “A platinum wig,” and “A peg-leg.”¹³⁷ In “Czarina of Supersaccharine” we learn that “[t]he female body is a thousand-year-old / freak show of / dried out mermaids [...] She is a palace of desiccated fetuses.”¹³⁸ In “WunderKammer,” the mother-speaker says of herself, “I was a meat-based creature I was chunky with carbon / I grew spleens, nails, fat lobes, etc.”¹³⁹ The mother figure in these poems is built of gruesome descriptions of reproductive parts interchanged with objects and oddities. She is a freak, a hybrid of artificial parts and preserved flesh, a piecemeal collection of weirdnesses and things that don’t exist; she is consistently dried out and ground up, treated as not human, and put up for observation and a false reverence. She is not respected, not valued, not human, and not quite real.

She is also host to the child-parasite, and as vessel, receptacle, or valise for a great variety of objects. Bernes says that in these poems, “The body is as much battlefield as it is...cabinet of wonders.”¹⁴⁰ In “A Diorama of my Puselage,” the mother-body is presented as a kind of monster infested with parasites and falsities and deadly things. The lines “In the forest of ovaries, crimson trees snap beneath the weight of their egg sacs...Dolls climb backwards out of my mouth”¹⁴¹ present birth imagery that can seem shocking in its dark extremity. When the poem states, “On skin-covered trees, colonies of embryos hang like crystal pendants. The Mother-body slides among them, a predatory spider, dropping mannequin legs out of her shiny thorax,” the object and mother are one, and are interchangeable. Then, “The

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p.39.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p.28.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, p.12.

¹⁴⁰ Bernes, Jasper ‘Revulsion as Revolt’. *Jacket Magazine*, Issue 29, April 2006. [Online] Available from: <http://jacketmagazine.com/29/bernes-review.html> [Accessed 8 July 2014].

¹⁴¹ Glenum, Lara *The Hounds of No*. Notre Dame: Action Books, 2005, p.19.

Mother body...will remove my poison sacs...I will wear her glass coffin like a wedding dress.”¹⁴² In this last stanza, a surreal form of care-taking and sacrifice occurs. The mother’s death coincides with the speaker-child’s birth and celebration and movement into marriage, the state for reproduction, so that she might in turn herself become the mother-body.

In “St. Liberata and the Alien Hordes,” the mother-speaker claims, “I was crucified as an alien host!”¹⁴³ The use of the word “host” here presents the mother as carrier and feeder of parasites. There is also talk of having “things” removed, as a form of birth: “they peeled the seedy, white pods / out of my large muscle groups // & scraped the sleeper colony out of my left lung.”¹⁴⁴ The violence of birth is also conveyed: “I began to split at the seams.”¹⁴⁵ In “How to Discard the Life You’ve Now Ruined,” the body is repeatedly described as a detached and disgusting entity, functional in all the wrong ways, and body parts are disposable and interchangeable with objects and pieces of debris. The speaker instructs the mother figure, “Sneak into the ‘shame hole’ / Remove the squirming pink sack from the gray pelt & / put a second body inside,” “Carve tiny beasts out of the teeth...Sew the animals into your stomach,” and “Tack the two legs onto your own hips & / gallop through zones of agony.”¹⁴⁶ This use of womb and motherhood imagery also suggests the creation of another, separate, self, and the suffering that must occur as a result of this creation. The mother in these poems is a self-sacrificing victim of scientific experiments and medical procedures, many of which seem to happen against her will, and is an object used by the child and by others outside of her who would create expectations for her

¹⁴² *Ibid*, p.19.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p.11.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.11.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.11.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.13.

role as mother. The detached treatment of this most sentimental of subjects lends it the feel of a horror movie or science fiction novel, and evokes the extreme and disturbing animalism of childbearing, yet this tone and treatment allow Glenum to attempt to avoid sentimentality and to convey the loss of identity often experienced by the maternal figure. Through this detachment and horror, the mother's sense of isolation, alienation from her body and herself, and loss of ownership and control are addressed.

The Hounds of No also speaks to this objectification of the mother with poems that highlight the external societal judgment and control weighing on the mother and her body. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich observes, "My individual, seemingly private pains as a mother, the individual, seemingly private pains of the mothers around me and before me and...the regulation of women's reproductive power by men in every totalitarian system and every socialist revolution, the legal and technical control by men of contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics, gynecology, and extra uterine reproductive experiments—all are essential to the patriarchal system."¹⁴⁷ This sentiment is echoed in Glenum's "Message to the Department of the Interior" when she opens the poem by seeming to report to some authority, "I have decided to grow a second body. This may be of some concern to you."¹⁴⁸ These lines act as though the decision to bear children is not a private one, and so suggest that a mother is an object owned by a government entity. Glenum's speaker continues by saying, "I know you said I should try to relax & ignore the residue the bombs left in my torso,"¹⁴⁹ expressing the pressure on the mother-figure to conform

¹⁴⁷ Rich, Adrienne *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, pp.33-34.

¹⁴⁸ Glenum, Lara *The Hounds of No*. Notre Dame: Action Books, 2005, p.17.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.17.

to societal expectation and be transformed into a machine that produces citizens for the state, while, paradoxically, accepting this transformation. By the end of the poem, the “it” is a “republic” which has “laid its terrible eggs on our tongues.”¹⁵⁰ The society, represented by a seeming government, literally becomes the entity which impregnates the speaker. This suggests that the speaker, as a representative of all mothers, has been infected with a sense of how she might behave and what she should do. She questions, “who can relax in our republic now”¹⁵¹ that its citizens are infested with a state that demands to monitor and be in control of its citizens’ bodies. Laura Carter says in *TYPO Magazine*, “a favorite of mine is ‘Message to the Department of the Interior,’ whose title doubles (triples?) as an address to both the state, and the subjective ‘realm,’ and the physical interior of a body. I read the speaker as a pregnant woman, with good reason... The poem becomes less a mother’s confession than... a mother’s lament.”¹⁵²

“In the Gynecological Museum” presents the mother as an object acted on by an outsider, a doctor who may represent a larger cultural invasion: “The good doctor / kept his hands in an ivory box. In the shop window of my / abdomen.”¹⁵³ Of course, the doctor is “good” by societal standards, though he treats the mother as mechanically subhuman and places his hands inside the delicately wrought and visually exposed representations of her private anatomical spaces. Birth is an act subject to outside involvement as well when the mother-speaker states, “I sprouted eleven ovaries & nine penises I dangled edible babies from greasy crimson stalks... I

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p.17.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.17.

¹⁵² Carter, Laura ‘Review of The Hounds of No’. *TYPO Magazine*, 2006. [Online] Available from: http://www.typomag.com/burningchair/2006/02/lara-glenum-hounds-of-no-action-books_24.html [Accessed 8 July 2014].

¹⁵³ Glenum, Laura *The Hounds of No*. Notre Dame: Action Books, 2005, p.22.

was later rewarded first prize at the angelic banquet” and “It was sheer ecstasy until the high court / ...mandated that / I be crucified / before I erupted & gave birth.”¹⁵⁴

At times, the act of reproduction is a positive one and the offspring a “prize.”

Elsewhere, birth is forbidden and punished by a “court” that represents a cultural consensus. This opens up an otherwise difficult discussion of the loss of identity and autonomy that motherhood can cause and the conflict a mother may feel regarding the loss of privacy and control of her body, while allowing for criticism of the societal sense that mothers and motherhood are subjects mainly worthy of positive treatment. As Jasper Bernes says, “In part, the unsentimentality of this poetry follows from its precision and clarity; she is not content to swaddle her images in overlays of abstraction and ambiguity. Rather, without squeamishness, she lays out the stark and uncompromising terms of her vision.”¹⁵⁵

Danielle Pafunda’s *Iatrogenic: Their Testimonies* is a book built entirely around the concept of the mother as mechanized, made-use-of object. *Iatrogenic* defines the mother-body as a machine to be loaned out and mistreated, as surrogates are created and nurtured to conceive, carry, and deliver children. Pafunda frames the situation behind *Iatrogenic* in a letter to H.L. Hix by saying, “*Iatrogenic* is a story of 1. a group of feminist-scientist-metaphysic(ists) who quit our world for one of their own making and 2. the surrogate-daughter-mothers on whom they intend to launch their new culture... The surrogates find themselves in a *Handmaid’s Tale* sort-of breeding bind.”¹⁵⁶ The use of surrogates reflects what E. Ann Kaplan points out as a

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.12.

¹⁵⁵ Bernes, Jasper ‘Revulsion as Revolt’. *Jacket Magazine*, Issue 29, April 2006. [Online] Available from: <http://jacketmagazine.com/29/bernes-review.html> [Accessed 8 July 2014].

¹⁵⁶ Hix, H.L. ‘Danielle Pafunda on Occupying our Conflicted Territory’. In *Quire*, October 23, 2012. [Online] Available from: <http://031454a.netsolhost.com/inquire/2012/10/23/danielle-pafunda-on-occupying-our-conflicted-terrain/> [Accessed July 8 2014].

series of “negative” narratives about surrogacy: the fact that “[s]urrogate reproduction is seen as cold and sterile because separated from love and family life” and that “‘Baby Farming’ is suggested...and the figure of the surrogate mom as human incubator predominates.” Kaplan talks of fears that, “[i]f surrogacy is regularized, a class of breeder women would be created...women valued both for their biological fertility *and* for their unnatural ability to reject their own flesh and blood.”¹⁵⁷ Karyn Valerius also speaks of the ways the surrogate is seen as mechanizing a biological reality, saying, “surrogacy as well as egg and sperm donation complicate kinship...rendering the natural boundaries of the human body ambiguous.”¹⁵⁸ In the book, Pafunda highlights the ways in which the female body is used and detached from the actual self by motherhood, and how outsiders can invade and shape the experience. As Johannes Goransson’s blurb on the back of the book states, Pafunda “present[s] a world where the decoy is more than real.”¹⁵⁹

Pafunda, like Glenum, speaks of the mother-body as an object, and explores birth and pregnancy as mechanical and invasive procedures. She often directly compares the mother-body to objects and animals in order to explore the ways in which the mother is seen and treated. In “Wherein a Surrogate Covers a Debt,” the maternal speaker secures “plaster teeth,” wears “a gown of egg white,” and when asked where it stings, replies “in my deck.”¹⁶⁰ In her review of *Iatrogenic*, Kristen Abraham says, “Pafunda’s use of the word ‘deck’ in this instance decentralizes meaning and subverts our expectations of bodily sensation enough to make us

¹⁵⁷ Kaplan, E. Ann “The Politics of Surrogacy Narratives: 1980’s Paradigms and Their Legacies in the 1990’s”. In: Kaplan, E. Ann and Susan Squier eds. *Playing Dolly: Technocultural Formations, Fantasies, & Fictions of Assisted Reproduction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999, pp.118-119.

¹⁵⁸ Valerius, Karyn “The Monstrous Genealogy of Assisted Reproduction”. In: Kaplan, E. Ann and Susan Squier eds. *Playing Dolly: Technocultural Formations, Fantasies, & Fictions of Assisted Reproduction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999, p.179.

¹⁵⁹ Pafunda, Danielle *Iatrogenic: Their Testimonies*. Las Cruces: Noemi Press, 2010, cover.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p.13.

consciously acknowledge the sting is everywhere. ‘Deck’ itself cannot be one particular location on our bodies so by naming it, the poet pushes us to investigate a sensation, as opposed to its location.”¹⁶¹ The use of the word, however, calls up several associations, such as the deck of a ship or the deck attached to the outside of a house, which may suggest that it refers to the abdomen as a visible place presented at the front and center of the body. In “Wherein a Surrogate Begins,” the mother-surrogate states, “My skin rolled back, my snap. Window, they said. / Slide, they said. And the package was secured to my rib / with a length of cable and a clove hitch.”¹⁶² In “Who Chose Mina Loy,” the speaker states: “To hoist one’s / bruise-shaped purse and rifle. // A stub, a strychnine brooch, a ballpoint esophagus.”¹⁶³ This direct pairing of body parts--the claim that a skin that moves as an object moves is also a window or slide, and the claim that the esophagus is also “ballpoint” like a pen--calls up a hybrid mechanized beast, a cyborg of sorts. This not only adds to the sense that Pafunda is creating a new “mother,” but also reminds us that this mother is meant to call attention to all that actual mothers are consigned to endure. “Who Chose Marguerite Gauthier” connects the self and the essential organs of the body to artificial and decorative objects by saying, “Fringed parasol, I tucked my charcoal lengthwise. / The thin plastic lung proceeded.”¹⁶⁴ These lines suggest that the self, the very “I,” is a “fringed parasol,” an ornamental, frilly object, an umbrella useless in the event of rain. This paired with the lung, an organ needed for life, but described as “thin” and “plastic,” leave us with a sense that even the most essential features of this speaker are false. In “In a Glade,” the book’s final poem, body parts

¹⁶¹ Abraham, Kristin ‘Kristen Abraham on Danielle Pafunda’. *HL_NGM_N*, Issue # 11, 2014. [Online] Available from: http://www.h-ngm-n.com/h_ngm_n-11/kristin-abraham-on-danielle-pafunda.html [Accessed 8 July 2014].

¹⁶² Pafunda, Danielle *Iatrogenic: Their Testimonies*. Las Cruces: Noemi Press, 2010, p.36.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, p.49.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.22.

are again mixed in with, and unable to be differentiated from, objects: “Beak, box pursed. Clam creased, estuary articulate, apiary / of gadfly and hormone. My jaws, my kisser, my portal. / My roam. Rim, trap, yap... Oh, ring me, / a fiddle between ingots.”¹⁶⁵ Here, the mouth is closed up but also speaking, just as the speaker is caught but also free, meaningless among value, valueless except for practical purposes.

The issue of identity is addressed in *Iatrogenic*, as the role of the surrogate and her sense of self are frequently confronted and the mother is presented as non-human. There are references to the ways that the surrogate might react or see herself, and how that identity is imposed upon her by others. “Wherein a Surrogate Notes the Passage” states, “In the cabinet, there was a depiction of *mirror image*,”¹⁶⁶ with the italicized emphasis on the other, clearly seen, but “created” self. In “Wherein a Surrogate Is Relieved,” the surrogate mother states, as she moves toward the process of impregnation and birth, “My middle face wore suddenly the approximate channel,”¹⁶⁷ giving the sense that there are several faces, several “channels” for faces, some of which seem more appropriate or more exact, more natural or more artificial, than others. This sense is confirmed in “Wherein a Surrogate Assumes the Role,” where the face of the speaker is created, dictated by, the “they”: “By the time the mirror descended, they had already / proscribed my countenance.”¹⁶⁸ This poem describes a “birth” and identifies the first step of that birth as the imposition of an identity upon the mother. This imposition of identity is represented by the creation of a face. Thus, the persona of mother is acknowledged as something shaped by

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.58.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.38.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p.40.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p.35.

outside, cultural forces, not something chosen by the mother herself; mothers are forced to be what others want them to be simply because they have become mothers. Their role in society has changed.

The book also addresses the ways in which pregnancy alters the reality of the mother. “Wherein a Surrogate’s Fruition Full” lets the mother-speaker claim, “I was to be your hulking flesh...I was, instead, I felt, a fleck. The speck of bitters / wound up by the tail and spun out over a clean porcelain / dish. I was this for you, I felt, and could do less.”¹⁶⁹ The mother expects to be made larger by motherhood, and is surprised to find that she actually feels smaller. She instead becomes a tool for the child she will bear. In the book’s first poem, “Wherein Proliferation is Explained to the Surrogates,” this sacrifice is named, and made clearer: “From then on, they say, we will be free / from solitude.”¹⁷⁰ The mother becomes an animal in “Wherein a Surrogate’s Cessation” when the speaker says, “I made as an animal / low on fours at the sight under flame,”¹⁷¹ and becomes a victim of self-mutilation in “Who Chose Anne Frank”: “I cut off each leg as it dragged behind me.”¹⁷² Both of these states further emphasize the mother’s hobbled, non-human nature, for, as previously discussed, though animals are not objects, they are often used metaphorically to represent the non-human. They also make statements about pregnancy itself, which is not only seen as an animalistic state, but can also be seen, especially in the context of this book, as a form of self-mutilation.

Finally, Pafunda explores the depersonalization of the mother figure by addressing pregnancy as a mechanized and invasive procedure, one controlled by

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p.54.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p.11.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.44.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, p.43.

outsiders, and one which victimizes the mother-surrogate. Jessica Bozek says in her review of *Iatrogenic* in *A. Bradstreet*, “Pafunda makes strange the artificially pregnant body, as well as comments on technocratic ideas of pregnancy and birth (e.g., the pregnant woman as broken machine).”¹⁷³ “Wherein Proliferation Is Explained to the Surrogates” introduces the process of impregnation by saying, “They tell us the cells will enter our reaches. . . . Silt the perimeter, trench / the wire.”¹⁷⁴ Already, the outside “they” is presented as a collective party in control of the body of the mother, and impersonal terms like “reaches,” “perimeter,” and “wire” are used to describe the parts of the body that will be affected. In “Wherein a Surrogate Refuses to Imbed,” the speaker reports, “You have become a half-clean cup they say, and note / my dim handle. . . . So they tell me. And so I note myself my drainage, / note the flaking pattern and the porous beneath.”¹⁷⁵ “Wherein a Surrogate Discovers the Gate” continues with this description of a mechanized method of reproduction: “I began to produce. My left crop circle glazed / and damp, though the right an obvious blunder. / A steady drip of white or clear or yellowed nutrition.”¹⁷⁶

“Wherein the Surrogate is Determined Prime” describes parts of the process by saying, “When the artifact came to skim my cavity” and “If only the cotton batting / had dissolved.”¹⁷⁷ “Wherein a Surrogate’s Amelioration” adds, “They slit open my tract and inserted the coiled / copper wire. In its hollow tip, a new fluid /

¹⁷³ Bozek, Jessica “Thicker, Animal, Entangled: Engaging Complexity in Mother-Narratives”. *A. Bradstreet*, 2013. [Online] Available from: <http://www.abradstreet.com/post/46922057277/thicker-animal-entangled-engaging-complexity-in> [Accessed 8 July 2014].

¹⁷⁴ Pafunda, Danielle *Iatrogenic: Their Testimonies*. Las Cruces: Noemi Press, 2010, p.11.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p.18.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p.24.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p.20.

they said would help me conjure,”¹⁷⁸ and “The Renegade Garden” states, “Dusky, / sow-prone, they ran my shuttle through the warp.”¹⁷⁹ The drainage and drip, the shuttle and tract, the “flaking pattern and porous beneath,” the crop circles and cavities and cotton batting, all lend a robotic sense to the process of reproduction and to the “bodies” being acted upon. Thus, the surrogates are mothers, and yet those mothers are machines. Though recognizable terms such as “thermometer” and “egg” are used to describe attempts at conception in “The Renegade Garden” when the surrogate states, “I arrange the cellophane ribbon, / the thermometer’s digits, the pang from the butterfly / suture. Here, in the latex glove, I have placed five eggs,”¹⁸⁰ they are located in a disparate context of ribbons and sutures and latex gloves, and so are distanced from us even in their familiarity. This allows the scenario of the poems to become a freakish, sci-fi series of experiments and tortures, somewhat medical, but also frightening and potentially malicious.

Pafunda’s use of surrogates clearly incorporates the idea of artificial womb, and it becomes obvious that she is drawing on science fiction depictions common to our culture, most famously Aldous Huxley’s 1932 novel *Brave New World*, where children are grown in artificial wombs constructed of animal organs, and certainly on feminist sci-fi novels such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood. The collection also touches on science fiction’s use of medically-engineered hybrids and cyborgs, such as those in “Rachel in Love,” about which Joan Haran says, “The cyborg boundary that Murphy examines is not that between human and machine... Rather, it is the boundary between human and animal (or, more properly,

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.26.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.57.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.57.

nonhuman animal)”¹⁸¹ or Anne McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang* which, according to Donna Haraway, “explored the consciousness of a cyborg, hybrid of a girl’s brain and complex machinery, formed after the birth of a severely handicapped child.”¹⁸² Pregnancy in Pafunda is treated as directly medical; Abraham observes, “We often find ourselves in what seems to be a hospital/medical scene, but in a room/department in a hospital unlike any we’ve ever been to.”¹⁸³ The surrogates are acted upon, rather than acting themselves. Pafunda herself states her views on the “use” of women in relation to the book in a letter:

I’m a breeder who revolts against the body-as-property equations of state and love... Like an amalgam of my women “Who Chose...” and my Surrogates, I simultaneously choose and am chosen for. I am, and I be-as-constructed. I acknowledge these competing states (though state sounds too static a term). I’ll never (never.) own the means of production, my body, my heart, myself, but I’ll always feel indignant and possessive when someone else—some state entity, some authority or lover—puts claim on them.¹⁸⁴

This passivity and paralysis comes clear in the poems. The book commences with this idea in place as the opening poem, “Wherein Proliferation is Explained to the Surrogates,” says, “I was stood, readied,”¹⁸⁵ and continues in “Wherein a Surrogate Begins” with “For some time they had jerked my abdomen,”¹⁸⁶ a violent, seemingly painful victimization. The midwives act upon the surrogates in several poems such as “Wherein a Surrogate Covers a Debt,” where “[t]he midwife imposed a thermometer / and materialized in the fragment hour”¹⁸⁷ and “Wherein a Surrogate

¹⁸¹ Haran, Joan ‘Simians, Cyborgs, and Women in ‘Rachel in Love’. In: Larbalestier, Justine ed. *Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006, p.252.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, p.251.

¹⁸³ Abraham, Kristin ‘Kristin Abraham on Danielle Pafunda’. *H_NGM_N*, Issue # 11, 2014. [Online] Available from: http://www.h-ngm-n.com/h_ngm_n-11/kristin-abraham-on-danielle-pafunda.html [Accessed 8 July 2014].

¹⁸⁴ Hix, H.L. ‘Danielle Pafunda on Occupying our Conflicted Territory’. In *Quire*, October 23, 2012. [Online] Available from: <http://031454a.netsolhost.com/inquire/2012/10/23/danielle-pafunda-on-occupying-our-conflicted-terrain/> [Accessed July 8 2014].

¹⁸⁵ Pafunda, Danielle *Iatrogenic: Their Testimonies*. Las Cruces: Noemi Press, 2010, p.11.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p.36.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p.13.

Assumes the Role,” where the surrogate-speaker says, “Still she applied the froth to my brow, the breath / to my belabored frame.”¹⁸⁸ Thus, the surrogates, as metaphors for a reproductive experience that lacks autonomy and self-possession, are acted upon and made use of by a series of medical personnel who care little for their well-being and seem forceful, distant, and at times, cruel.

In *Iatrogenic*, impregnation is referred to as a “procedure,” with a “protocol” that should be followed, which presents it as regulated, impersonal behavior. Throughout the book, there is a sense of discomfort, of forced or imposed impregnation, with the surrogates presented as victims or tools, and with no consideration of the physical and psychological trauma imposed on them. Much suffering happens as a result of impregnation and gestation, and there are even suggested attempts at, or dreams of, escape. “Wherein a Surrogate Fails to Admit” explains, “And when her / abdominal plates split along the crest, when they girded / her limb with a putty and fuselage she could not call / what she had a *pain*.”¹⁸⁹ This version of birth, the splitting open of “plates” during which the mother does not quite feel pain, though she feels something like it, distances the surrogate mother from the process, downplays suffering while making it plain that it exists, and so mechanizes the process and the mother involved. This same poem ends with the lines, “They say we cannot complain. They asked me / to remove the tourniquet, and when I clarified that / the limb was mine, they asked me to remove that as well.”¹⁹⁰ In “Wherein a Surrogate Begins,” the mother seems to resist the “procedure,” and is belittled by what follows it: “What pins and brads I could dislodge / I did. When the

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p.35.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.12.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p.12.

procedure failed, they sent the midwife... She noted the condition.”¹⁹¹ Here the midwife is much like a modern nurse, jotting down notes in an impersonal way, distant from the patient.

The birth process becomes more and more unpleasant as the book proceeds, so that the speaker in “Wherein a Surrogate is Determined Prime” bemoans, “I could not have known / the choke beforehand. I cannot now stall the choke.”¹⁹² The speaker is stifled and endangered, a natural consequence of being the carrier of another, and “Wherein a Surrogate’s Fruition Full” has the surrogate claim, “And when they stitched into my grin, I could no longer / say which was a violation and which affectation.”¹⁹³ The impregnation, the gestation, and the birth become less and less about the creation of another human being, and more about the use of the surrogate against her will. The surrogates also begin to consider escape and express distinct acts of rebellion, rejecting the oppressive protocol. In “Wherein a Surrogate’s Amelioration,” as the midwife “dares” her “always / [with] the width of her” to move, “to fall left or right,” the surrogate denies her own actions and blames them on the procedure by saying, “It wasn’t me, I told them. It was the potion...”¹⁹⁴ “Who Chose Elizabeth Siddal” contains a moment of considering an attempted escape: after stating “I was that world’s exotic prison rat,” the speaker reveals, “And though I could wiggle between bars... I couldn’t skip beyond its reckless walls.”¹⁹⁵

Pafunda’s poems, as spoken by the collective, interchangeable, expendable “surrogates,” comment on the way Western culture can be accused of valuing mothers less than their offspring. Bozek says, when discussing Pafunda’s work,

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.36.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, p.20.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, p.54.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p.26.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p.26.

“What’s surprising, however, is that neither topic—the medical world’s manipulation of the female body and the trials this body endures—is a regular feature of postpartum conversation.” She continues, “We might not want to look beyond the frame, but if we’re being honest, we need accounts of pregnancy, birth, and parenthood—like Pafunda’s...that consider how a woman’s body is made strange during these periods...I mean that we need accounts that deepen our understanding of these complicated, often ambivalent experiences.”¹⁹⁶

In *The Reproduction Cinema*, the mother figure undergoes the loss of humanity through the maternal experience; various modes of objectification convey the absence of self, the loss of control, and the suppressed emotions that occur as a result. The mother is often turned into an actual object. In “I Have Never Been So Elegiac,” the mother-speaker states, “I was a tinder box, a grasping tendon / of drying grass. A rattle of seeds and three / strands of hair.” Thus, she becomes an object that has the potential to create fire, but is also nearly dead while continuing to grasp or hold on. The mother figure is the noise made by seeds that will never be planted, never reach their reproductive potential, and, as strands of hair, she is a component of the body that is neither alive nor active. Later in the poem, she states, “I fear I am the figure now behind each pane of glass,” a mannequin-like figure, plastic, trapped. When she laments, “If my heart were less of a tabernacle. / If my skin were not such an obstacle for light,” she becomes a religious object housing the sacred. “Household Psalm” also makes use of a metaphor containing an artificial human: “Neighbors like mannequins / stand in the window displays of my kitchen.

¹⁹⁶ Bozek, Jessica “Thicker, Animal, Entangled: Engaging Complexity in Mother-Narratives”. *A. Bradstreet*, 2013. [Online] Available from: <http://www.abradstreet.com/post/46922057277/thicker-animal-entangled-engaging-complexity-in> [Accessed 8 July 2014].

We pose / and pose through good mother conversations... I am stifled, / I am fake, what will it take to free me from this.” Much like the plastic limbs in Lara Glenum’s poem “A Diagram of Kriemhilde’s Dollhouse” and the enslaved surrogates in Pafunda’s work, these mothers are propped up and robbed of their identities, falsified and enslaved and forced to bear children.

Comparisons to objects continue as the mothers in the book are compared to balloons and bouquets of flowers, shoes and cords and oil rigs. In “Leitmotif of the Mothers,” “the mothers...feel themselves rising like balloons / only to burst”: they are temporary, fragile and out of control. By the end of the poem, the mothers become bouquets of flowers “hung in a closet away from the light / to stiffen and dry, to fix and preserve.” In this comparison of the mothers to bouquets held during a wedding as the marital vows were said, the very event that has brought them to the “death” of motherhood is highlighted. In another poem by the same title, the mothers say, “our shin bones will be the reefs for surface creatures.” Thus, it is suggested that the mothers compromise their humanity, as their shin bones are no longer parts of a living body, and are of use to others rather than founded in a self significant for its own sake. In “Apocalypse Church,” the mothers “shine / like shoes, corset thin as a dress”: the mothers have the qualities of decorative objects. In “Song of the Replica,” a mother declares, “I am the mere cord, / never to be cut, / I am the mere rut that rakes / its way from the road to the pond,” and in “Amnesia District,” another says, “My chest is a rig / that has ceased to unfold. Drilling for oil / is the plight. Now we are spitting up // gold from our veins.” Here, there is the sense of woman as a machine that creates something of worth, but is not of worth itself.

More direct comparisons to machinery occur often in the poems. “Sisyphean Labor” directly addresses the machinery of motherhood, the relentless nature of the labor and the way that it can compromise the humanity of the mother. A series of mechanical acts, “I make them waffles,” “I make them oatmeal,” “I pull on their coats,” are rejected by the children, the subjects of the acts: “They don’t eat them,” “They don’t eat it,” “They cry over which shoes.” The fact that the mothers cannot complete the acts successfully sets up a cycle of inability so that they become mere contraptions, enacting relentless, thankless tasks. The language of the poem is also measured as a way to further emphasize the tedium and entrapment. In “The Selves of Me Hang Like Bells Without Tongues,” there is a litany of labors listed by the mother-speaker: “Feed them, clothe them, for how long did / I nurse them,” acknowledging the relentless nature of the tasks in the stark statement, “Now I realize it was forever.” The poem presents the mother’s body as a husk used by the child as it develops and then consumes the mother’s identity. “Instructions for Motherhood” lists lengthy maternal instructions: “Gut the herring. Cover your body in ash... Layer dirty linens with hot water and lye.” By the end of the poem, the activities listed imply extreme self-sacrifice, culminating in “Card your skin.”

Mothers also become animals. “Amnesia District” ends with a comparison to a quail as killed game, which loses its life to feed someone else. The mother-speaker states, “I am... a good quail nesting close, but exposed and then / in the bag with a snapped neck before the dog / can sound, before the long grass can protect.” The speaker is “good,” one of the cultural standards required of mothers, and seeks protection but is denied safety and so is sacrificed. One version of “Leitmotif of the Mothers” presents the mother as an animal that doesn’t belong, and so mars a mechanical process: “I am the eel in the ironworks slithering, slipping.” Another

presents the collective mothers as pig-like mother-animals who are victims of the lives they have chosen to live, and transforms living rooms to slaughterhouses by saying, “they will eat from the trough, / lie in the slop” and “They will be trotted off and butchered / in the stale living rooms of their own unhappy choice.” In “Domestic Metrology,” a mother is “The head of a rhinoceros, / mounted.” And in “Apocalypse Church,” the speaker, again one of the collective mothers, says, “Our hair / gone Palomino-loose” and “we...hiss and glisten as serpents do.” The mothers are animals killed and displayed for ornamental purposes, animals suggesting the Garden of Eden, animals hunted and slaughtered. Thus, they are no longer human, and not in control of their lives.

Finally, though the deaths of the mothers are mostly metaphoric deaths, something is “killed” in the women as a result of the endless labor and series of soulless exchanges. Death becomes a metaphor for the destruction of self, the loss of humanity, the transformation of the subject from autonomy to exploitation. It also suggests more literally that mothers are robbed of health, endangered by the experience, transformed not only into corpses but also into people whose mental and physical health is compromised by the unremitting nature of the maternal experience. In “How the Haystack of the Heart Loses its Needle,” one mother declares, “I was born dead.” In “Domestic Metrology,” it is said of the mother-wife, “You are figuring / in the garden the way a carcass might, cold, wrung with troubles, / legs twisted.” In “Leitmotif of the Mothers,” the mothers say, “We are dead already,” and the maternal body is presented as an object broken and artificial: “Our fingernails / blacken and our leg bones curl. Our hair grows brittle / and our eyes dull.” The eyes here are tuned out, suggesting emotional absence. The mothers in the manuscript are, like Glenum and Pafunda’s mothers, treated as dead things when

they become objects “used” by someone else, the culture or the state, to birth children. Mothers are again worthless instruments made use of to create something of worth in “Domestic Metrology,” which refers to the mother as “Dam bred. Dam / milked. Sentenced to death.” In the “Problems of the Mothers” sequence, the mothers are a collective entity, acted upon instead of acting, victimized, lost.

Chapter Four: The Objecti-Child Poem

A number of contemporary American poets have also resisted sentimentality and idealism in the motherhood poem by objectifying the child in poems. If, as Joy Katz tells us, a baby in a poem “pressures the poem” by introducing “a set of cultural expectations,”¹⁹⁷ speaking of the child as an object, and thereby easing the contextual emotional milieu, may, it might be argued, remove this pressure. Karin Calvert claims that, “[i]n both a material and a grammatical sense, children have usually been regarded as objects. Traditionally, they were the possessions of their parents, to be dealt with as parents thought best.”¹⁹⁸ Our culture creates a form of child objectification as, according to Parker, “[the mother] experiences herself as the good, persecuted other while the baby is seen as...the justifiable object of hatred. The primary cause is our culture’s ambivalence toward maternal ambivalence...Our culture defends itself against the recognition of ambivalence originating in the mother by denigrating or idealising her.”¹⁹⁹ Betty Friedan argues that, because of mothers who “live vicariously through the child” due to loss of identity, the child “is reduced...to nonhumanness.”²⁰⁰ If our culture creates a forum for the objectification of the child through the oppression of the mother, poetry can use it to a different end.

The “Objecti-Child” poem seems to have evolved directly from the depersonalized representation of the mother figure. It mechanizes the child to

¹⁹⁷ Katz, Joy ‘Baby Poetics’. *American Poetry Review*, 42 (6), 2013, p.13.

¹⁹⁸ Calvert, Karin *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992, p.15.

¹⁹⁹ Parker, Rozsika *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. London: Virago Press Ltd, 2005, p.24.

²⁰⁰ Friedan, Betty *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, pp.413-415.

distance it, and to allow the child to be talked about without the stigma of sentiment. As a companion to the Mechani-Mom poem, the Objecti-Child takes the most precious of all things, the child, whom we are meant to nourish and sacrifice for, and casts it up on the altar of the impersonal as a means of resisting the sentimental poem describing the ideal child. It makes the ideal child not only real, but grotesque. In this way, women poets are able to say things about the nature of motherhood while avoiding cultural censorship invoked by a seemingly real situation. If a theater is made of the object-child, the poet can speak freely without desecrating the holy sacrament.

Matthea Harvey's satirical poem "An Idea Only Goes So Far" presents a baby "made up" as a source of pride and then exhibited as a list of accessory objects. The "baby" takes on an identity of objects, is made as useful and bland and edible, i.e. disposable, "as a hatbox or a cake." It is fat and posed as a trained elephant, and as carefully orchestrated as the elephant's stance when it is on "a little round platform, cramming all four feet together."²⁰¹ Words such as "perfectly" and "wonderful" appear like mechanical gears throughout the poem, estranged from a genuine sense of emotion, sterilized of any connection, and suggest a sense of decorum that overcomes attachment or sentiment. All of this suggests that the speaker and the culture, or the world the speaker is shaped by and part of, like the *idea* of a baby more than any actual baby, much as motherhood poems which idealize the child have at times celebrated the idea of the baby more than they celebrated the baby itself, and have often celebrated the idea, not the actuality, of motherhood.

²⁰¹ Harvey, Matthea *Sad Little Breathing Machine*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2004, p.32.

After the making of the baby in the poem, which seems to require no human effort, intimacy, or anything real or human or bodily, there is “[a]ppraise all around”²⁰² as though an unseen collective audience is doling out cultural approval as the reward inherent in conformity. With this consensus, it is acknowledged that “there’s no denying [the speaker] had made a good baby,”²⁰³ which furthers the sense that all babies are good, that making a baby is always worthy of reward and celebration. The baby’s “sweet face” and “pair of pretty eyes,” as well as its expected christening, is met with ultimate cultural acceptance.

Harvey’s speaker says of the baby: “I didn’t coo at her, though. She wasn’t that kind of baby.”²⁰⁴ With this declaration, Harvey suggests that this baby is not the baby of the traditional poem, not the baby of sweetness and wonder. This baby is a platter, a footstool, all things useful and shapeless, everyday and almost unseen. This baby is the object of the baby, absent of reality and meaning, idealized and glorified and accepted by the masses, but not in any way connected to what a baby actually *is*.

“When you make up a good baby, other people will want one too,” Harvey writes, “Who’s to say that I’m the only one who deserves a dear little machine-washable ever-so-presentable baby.”²⁰⁵ This references the cultural pressure that suggests that women must be mothers and may not be complete unless they are. Harvey’s pairing of “machine-washable” with “ever-so-presentable” reminds the reader of the language of innumerable television commercials for household cleaning products, aimed at housewives and presenting a clean house and clean

²⁰² *Ibid*, p.32.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, p.32.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p.32.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p.32.

clothes as the most desirable goals to be obtained. The baby herself is again an object, able to be tidied, washed out, cleaned, bleached, freed of flaws, and conveniently tied to the apotheosis of household rituals. In this way, “ever-so-presentable” becomes the ideal for the mother, conferring status upon her by indicating that she has the ability to keep things tidy and controlled. The opinions of other people are, by implication, more important even than maternal love.

In addition, the affection that happens in the poem is the affection of a “stray red sock” that is compared to “the tongue of some large animal.”²⁰⁶ The baby is washed in the washing machine, a type of washing that no actual baby could of course survive, and so becomes in principle an object washed by an object. She is washed with a piece of clothing that belongs on the foot, that most estranged body part, washed by the sock, that least respected, most expendable piece of clothing. The comparison to the animal tongue shows us that in the only moment of affection, the baby has been groomed by a dirty item of clothing, and so is removed even farther from the human experience.

Harvey kills off her baby at the end of “An Idea Only Goes So Far,” saying in an interview with the Katonah Poetry Series, “I didn’t think she was going to die, so I was shocked when she did. The rhyme led to her death. The word ‘dead’ was orbiting the poem the minute I wrote that her flaw was ‘dread.’”²⁰⁷ And yet it is this moment that finalizes the separation of the baby from any form of sentiment. In this moment, she truly becomes as disposable as an idea. The baby herself is presented as a good idea, and the irony becomes clear, since a baby may seem a good idea

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p.32.

²⁰⁷ Kuhn, Andy ‘Interview with Matthea Harvey’. *Katonah Poetry Series*, 2014. [Online] Available from: <http://katonahpoetry.com/interviews/the-matthea-harvey-interview/> [Accessed 8 February 2015].

until it is born and the amount of work involved in raising and caring for an actual child is realized. In this way, Harvey confirms her overarching point: that the idea of a child may be more appealing than an actual child, the same message that traditional motherhood poems have carried for centuries without being aware that they did so.

Like Harvey, Kathleen Ossip, in her poem “Babyland,” removes the child from the context of sentiment in order to objectively examine the ways in which the cultural consensus surrounding motherhood may impose damage on real-life mothers. Ossip begins the poem with the ironic statement, “Enter warily: here suavity reigns.”²⁰⁸ There is no place less “suave” than a place where a baby might be, and yet as the poem moves forward, and babies accumulate and are immediately placed in adult roles, it becomes clear that Ossip is pointing to the ways our culture considers babies’ potentials before they can even speak, and how, because the baby is central and fragile and important, the baby is expected to be the center of the mother’s new existence.

As the poem proceeds, the subsequent babies become less and less significant, until the fourth baby is “nothing more than a figurehead.”²⁰⁹ The babies are further depersonalized as well. As they continue to be “born,” the babies take on the names of professions, such as “newsboy baby” and “sculptor baby” rather than child names. In the final line of the second stanza, “vegetable marrows” become more baby-like than the poem’s babies as they “sop up a nutritive fluid.”²¹⁰ The babies are placed in meaningless, mechanized adult roles while the centers of plant

²⁰⁸ Wolff, Rebecca *et al. eds. Not for Mothers Only: Contemporary Poems on Child-Getting and Child-Rearing.* Albany: Fence Books, 2007, p.292.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p.292.

²¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.292.

life are nourished meaningfully; babies are thought of in terms of adult potential from birth, placing pressure on the mother to nurture this potential, while mere plant marrows are growing in a productive way by doing not much more than absorbing without thought or consideration whatever supplement lies in reach.

By the penultimate stanza, babies are “scamper[ing] into their burrows”²¹¹ like animals. By the start of the final stanza, as Ossip states, “Here reign the sneaky essentials: tread softly / and with respect for the perils you will suffer or cause,”²¹² she speaks of the pressure on mothers, the unseen pressures to do exactly what it is that allows each child to thrive. In the poem’s final lines, the “preciousness” of the babies cause the actual death of the mother, “just as nature intended.”²¹³ This sounds very much like the idea presented in Rollin’s “Motherhood Myth,” that all women want to be mothers and will find joy only in motherhood.²¹⁴ The “preciousness” mentioned kills the mother by creating a situation where she sacrifices herself in order to be certain that her child thrives, and points to the creation of a standard of motherhood that no mother can be reasonably expected to live up to.

Poet Lia Purpura based an entire collection around the concept of the Objecti-Child. In her book *King Baby*, Purpura introduces a narrative where, according to *Publishers Weekly*, an object found on a beach becomes “alternately a found doll, a missing child, a spiritual representative of childhood and a real infant to whom the poet gave birth. Purpura captures both the fierce love and the flighty weirdness of life with a baby, opting always for the symbolic and the surprising over

²¹¹ *Ibid*, p.292.

²¹² *Ibid*, p.292.

²¹³ *Ibid*, p.292.

²¹⁴ Rollin, Betty ‘Motherhood: Who Needs It?’. *Look Magazine*, September 22, 1970, pp.15-17.

the literal record.”²¹⁵ Sarah Vap points out that, “[i]n the collection...Purpura seems to constantly acknowledge that force which might be resistant to hearing a woman’s poems about babies and then to completely ignore or circumvent it through the strategy of the King Baby.”²¹⁶

Purpura’s approach is interesting in that she often pairs descriptions of the object-child, in actuality a hollowed gourd decorated with cowry shells, with a more traditional description of the maternal behaviors and sentiments imposed upon it, often within a single poem. Even as she says of the object “your body / looked like a buoy,”²¹⁷ she feeds it—“Are you hungry, King Baby? I haven’t even asked”²¹⁸—teaches it—“If you want a field defined, / I’ll show you a field”²¹⁹—and sacrifices for it—“King Baby, tire me / as you see fit, / as you see I am fit / for constancy (all those / hours of night feeding).”²²⁰ In “You with a block of ice in your head...,” Purpura pairs “a skirt of shells / and shells for eyes, leather ears” with “wide mouth eliciting such tenderness,” “I will ever be your subject,” and “now can you rest?”²²¹ In “Best you know my hands...,” she says, “I took and laid your parts / to dry before the coiled radiator,” speaking clearly of an inanimate object, but then says, a few lines down, “I work with the hands of one who first made you,”²²² thereby conveying maternal responsibility and love, even though this may seem inappropriate to its subject. In one of the most concretely descriptive poems of the volume, “No stylus touched you...,” Purpura details the making of the object with

²¹⁵ ‘Review of *King Baby*’. *Publisher’s Weekly*, April 21, 2008. [Online] Available from: <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-882295-68-5> [Accessed 8 February 2015].

²¹⁶ Vap, Sarah ‘Poetry, Belligerence, and Shame’. *Pleiades*, 32 (1), 2012, pp.73-75.

²¹⁷ Purpura, Lia *King Baby*. Farmington: Alice James Books, 2008, p.13.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.22.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.21.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, p.5.

²²¹ *Ibid*, p.7.

²²² *Ibid*, p.24.

“a sharp blade / precisely made your mouth. / An awl worked on the vertical / and a threader, a contraption / like fine fingers, for the embellishment / of eyes and voice.” And yet this poem ends with the lines “The story of your creation starts / with a force that wanted something / and worked to see if you were it.”²²³ This sentiment-driven moment is suggestive of the way that the birth of a child can often be initiated through a couple’s nameless desire and evolve into a process marked by uncertainty. Through these pairings of the object and a more traditional sense of a rich emotional reality, Purpura deals openly with sentiment while allowing the reality of the physical and inanimate object to quell the potential for cliché and temper the tone. In this way, the real and pressing emotion that a mother might feel for her child can be explored without the danger of a less acceptable sentimentality permeating the poems.

This treatment of object and sentiment reaches an apex, allowing the concept of the Objecti-Child to crystallize, about halfway through the book in the poem titled “I thought I saw you in the museum...” In this poem, which describes the bodies of dead babies in a museum, Purpura melds object and child, giving the sense of a living baby with “The hair, / real hair, / in grassy tufts” while acknowledging its state by “calling one *it*.” The speaker of the poem describes the babies, who she tried to make “not real,” as “float[ing] / upright in their jars below the meniscus / slung between two worlds.”²²⁴ These worlds are the worlds of the living and the dead, but also the worlds of the lifeless object and the living, breathing baby worthy of sentiment. There is a true sense of motherly grief and distress to this poem as the speaker concludes, speaking of her gourd-baby, “It was no relief at all to think of

²²³ *Ibid*, p.2.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, p.27.

you, / mostly whole, only a few wide cuts / and little breaks I know of.”²²⁵ The desire of a mother to keep her child safe above all else, in a world where absolute safety is an impossibility, is highlighted here, and yet is conveyed in an environment cleansed of traditional sentiment by the objectified nature of the subject itself.

As the poems of *King Baby* move forward, they negotiate the diffuse complexity of maternal emotion. More and more, the mother-speaker finds herself identifying or longing to identify with her Objecti-Child. She says, “I want to be of use and with a task: / a rubber band, a strawberry... The race track of a paperclip” and “I want to be seen as ornament.” She blends her sense of herself with that of her child, saying “I want to be...found / as you have been found, King Baby” and “Holding you, I am held.”²²⁶ There is a distinct sense of the mother feeling lost and experiencing a loss of self, of holding onto herself only by holding on to her child. This is a mother who is longing to be mothered. The speaker says plaintively: “To every simplicity I’ve ever known: bye.”²²⁷

As the book begins to explore the ambivalence of the maternal experience, the combination of the emotional reality of childhood with the lost/found object state of the subject becomes relevant for yet another reason. Purpura is presenting an object as a deaf receiver of maternal expressions of fear and doubt. Not only does this allow her to throw up emotional questions and possible answers without complication or response; it also provides space for a more realistic representation of the child. For all babies take, they cannot consciously give, at least not in a way that comes to the aid of the complex struggles of the mother adjusting to her new reality.

²²⁵ *Ibid*, p.27.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, p.42.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, p.42.

Lia Purpura's *King Baby* succeeds in dealing with more traditional descriptions of maternal caretaking by setting up an Objecti-Child dynamic that allows her to talk about conflicting emotional aspects of motherhood without having to negotiate the pressures of sentimentality centered around presence of a child. Purpura's use of the child as object allows her to contribute to the poetic dialogue surrounding motherhood without navigating the literary dangers of sentiment; the depersonalized nature of the Objecti-Child allows her to explore the significance of birth through the sacred building of the object. The optimistic ending of the book, however, returns to the more conventional idealism of the Motherhood Myth. Even as Vap asks, "Why was I shocked when I thought she was writing flat-out spiritually-linguaged love poems about her own actual child?"²²⁸ Purpura sets the stage for the blending of detachment and devotion that allows maternal struggle and reward to be explored, and yet concludes on a poem that questions whether the volume's Objecti-Child is "singing or asking to be fed[.]" The poet returns to a confirmation that motherhood is an experience ruled by joy. The speaker's final words resonate by denying the object-child's need as need, and converting it instead to celebration: "I hear it decided: song, and not hunger."²²⁹

Lia Purpura's book creates a "child" of a found object in order to speak of the complexity of the motherhood experience. There are more poems about fear of losing the "baby," and about what would have happened if the child had never been found, than there are about expressing a more idealized form of love. The environment is not a nursery; there are no cribs or baby blankets. This child is a castaway who washed up on a beach and was left. The finding of this child was a

²²⁸ Vap, Sarah 'Poetry, Belligerence, and Shame'. *Pleiades*, 32 (1), 2012, pp.73-75.

²²⁹ Purpura, Lia *King Baby*. Farmington: Alice James Books, 2008, p.64.

chance event, with consequences that are complex and not by any means entirely positive. And yet Vap expresses her sense that all of this is important ground for mothers, and poets of motherhood, to tread on: “Either way, actual baby, object baby, idea of baby, actual motherhood, idea of motherhood—I was glad Purpura wrote about them and, no matter which of those things she was most focused on, remained deeply tender about babies. Remained, I would say, teasing, taunting, aware of, or risking sentimentality. Remained, I think, at least a little belligerent.”²³⁰

There is certainly belligerence when poets make use of death as the most extreme form of objectification. The “baby destruction”²³¹ poem, as Blake Butler calls it in his review of Hiromi Ito’s *Killing Kanoko*, detaches sentiment from the child with the understanding that the killing of a baby or child in a poem may render that child an object undeserving of feeling or tender treatment and can shift consideration away from the more common focus of sentiment and expected pleasure. These poems are, in essence, political statements about the nature of motherhood, creating a sense of shock, perhaps with the intent of examining the problems inherent in the gender-based constraints imposed on the motherhood poem as well as on the act of mothering itself.

Alicia Ostriker speaks of the killing of the baby in the poem “Song of the Abandoned One,” from her book *The Mother/Child Papers*. The poem begins with the lines “Kill the baby / I am sorry / kill the baby / by poking its eyes / by smashing its head / by hitting it very hard.”²³² Though the sibling of the baby, and so a child herself, seems to be the speaker of this poem, the shock of one’s response remains. It

²³⁰ Vap, Sarah ‘Poetry, Belligerence, and Shame’. *Pleiades*, 32 (1), 2012, pp.73-75.

²³¹ Butler, Blake ‘Review of *Killing Kanoko* by Hiromi Ito’. *HTMLGiant*, 2009. [Online] Available from: <http://htmlgiant.com/random/killing-kanoko-by-hiromi-ito/> [Accessed 20 July 2014].

²³² Ostriker, Alicia *The Mother/Child Papers*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009, p.34.

seems likely that today's writer of the Objecti-Child poem might also be influenced directly by Ito, whose poems make use of the name of her actual daughter. In the title poem, Ito's speaker claims: "I want to get rid of or kill Kanoko / Before she spills my blood...It's easy if you do it right after giving birth / It's easier than an abortion if you just don't get found out."²³³ She offers an image of the infant daughter "swarming with ants"²³⁴ like a dead baby sparrow after abandonment. Though Ito goes on to speak of abortion and interchanges the destruction of the parent with the destruction of the child in a way that expands the intent of this poem, she also says, "My own self is dearer to me,"²³⁵ which calls up the threat to identity that a mother can experience upon the birth of a child. Such statements do serve to depersonalize the child by asking the reader to imagine the death of a newly born infant as well as its dead body; this is perhaps as far from the more predictable, positively focused motherhood poem as a writer might go.

In *The Reproduction Cinema*, I have sought to depersonalize and objectify the child in a number of different ways and to a variety of different effects. Most often, I have treated children as a collective without individuality. In "Offspring," children identify themselves as "born of / the cold: we grow old / in its false crochet. / We are stripped clean, / denied names, leavened like bread. / Cutting teeth, we flee, / lungless animals who / breathe through our skin." The Objecti-Child offspring are made from cold, left nameless, and dehumanized through comparisons to amphibians and insects. Collectively, they move forward: "When the children could not pass stool, the doctors told them the pain was within normal range. When the children could not keep the room still, the doctors told them children turn and turn.

²³³ Ito, Hiromi *Killing Kanoko*. Notre Dame: Action Books, 2009, p.37.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, p.37.

²³⁵ *Ibid*, p.37.

When the children could not smooth their chests, the doctors told the mothers bones grow and the ribs break through and the shapes of things lose their symmetry and caliber.” In “The Naming,” the children are indifferent objects: “Their faces pass in a series of jars and they are heartless and they have the ashes of factory smoke and the bricks of the mill yard and library windows once all the panes are broken.” At times, they are treated collectively as “offspring.” The sardonic act of “praising” the offspring, as well as the use of the collective pronouns “they” and “them,” seek to distance the children from the emotional reality of the speaker and of the reader.

As with so many of the other poems mentioned in this chapter, the objectification of the child is blended with a softer sense of sentiment. The poem “The Selves of Me Hang Like Bells Without Tongues” begins:

Feed them, clothe them, for how long did
I nurse them and for how long was their skin mine,
for how long did their teeth grow to bone in my womb,

for how long were their fingernails sewn from protein
I would lend. And for how long, now that the teeth
slit the gum like a letter from the envelope budding forth,

do they come to me in grief and I soothe them and hold them
and guide them through.

The sense of being overtaken and physically possessed by the very children for whom one also feels the most extreme responsibility and genuine love was for me at the very heart of the maternal experience. This idea of being ruled by both struggle and love was more true to my sense of the maternal experience than the idealism found in some motherhood poems, and I wanted to write poems that would reflect that complex and confusing reality.

In “In Praise of Offspring,” the speaker demands that we “[p]raise their voices like barbs in the skin” and so compares the voices of the children to a sharpened,

embedded object. A second poem with the same title again mixes sentiment and objectification: “Praise the anarchy in their grip. Their fine hair. / Praise the way they care for you, steamroller or vacuum.” The same children of beautiful, soft hair are compared to two objects generally thought of as destructive, which flatten or create an absence. This poem also underlines the ambivalence inherent in the maternal experience with “Praise the small clothes. Praise the curl / of the ear underneath the hair like a seashell / come ashore. Praise cliché. It is all cliché. / Praise it all. It is also true,” a passage meant to mix tenderness and a sense of cynicism, as well as to make reference to the cultural expectation that all children be praised and the ways in which this praise has become a stereotypical act of the maternal poem.

The force of the collective Objecti-Child displays an effect on the speaker-mother similar to that seen in Purpura and Ossip, as the identity of the mother is compromised: “You are wallpapered / with their electricity. You are briefcased by / their scenery. Your new gravity is / their ever-heavy star.” In “The Naming,” “Their whispers are the images we carry. Their spines are the spines of books. Pages loosened, they no longer exist. We find our reflections there in several waters.” The children are like books, are abstractions, and are waters where the mother-speaker might find her reflection and attempt to pin down some vestige of herself.

I also use a depersonalized tone and an air of detachment, as in the poem “My Attachment,” where the speaker says ironically, “My attachment is academic. My attachment / is situational and boxed as parcels...My attachment has / the inner winters at the glass eyes of / taxidermied animals...My attachment / is outstretched like the body of one / who’s been dead.” In a poem seemingly about attachment, a *lack* of attachment is actually described. In addition, though I had originally ended

the book with a poem about swimming that had a strongly optimistic twist, in the latest version I end on a more linguistically distant poem. The final line, “Forsaken, you doctor it: oxygen: the dark,” suggests an attempt to remedy the feeling of abandonment that comes with the darkness of some aspects of the motherhood experience; the reader is left with no firm sense of whether that attempt might succeed. This resists the sentimental desire to reassure the reader that in motherhood, love will prevail, and that the pleasure and joy found in the experience must always be the overruling and final truth.

Conclusion

Rozika Parker says, “mothers do look to other mothers to find ‘absolution’ for maternal emotions which the dominant cultural representations of motherhood render unacceptable, and which mothers themselves experience as both painful and unforgivable.”²³⁶ As a mother who struggled with the demands of her parental role, I was pulled to write about the ambivalence of the motherhood experience, and the authors of the *Mechani-Mom* and *Objecti-Child* poems freed me to take part in this dialogue, one with both political and personal implications. They freed me to examine the effects and limitations of sentimentality and the ideal in poems which echoed a more pervasive cultural sentiment. This, in turn, allowed me to write about motherhood at last.

This research, and the writing of this poetry collection, have helped me to develop, I hope, a more nuanced understanding of motherhood and its considerable emotional complexities. The *Mechani-Mom* and *Objecti-Child* poems are one step toward recognizing, and so eliminating, the pleasant mask that many women feel they must wear as they compromise their freedom and compromise themselves. The *Mechani-Mom* poem and the *Objecti-Child* poem are, therefore, a possible step toward realizing this cultural inertia and remedying a deeply entrenched, gender-based oppression. By consciously addressing the less positive aspects of motherhood, these poems might also expand the mouth and the heart of the motherhood poem in the ever-changing dialogue that is contemporary poetry.

²³⁶ Parker, Rozsika *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. London: Virago Press Ltd, 2005, p.5.

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The Problems of the Mothers

Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the editors of the following journals, in which these poems first appeared:

American Poetry Review: “The Pact,” “Trajectory”

Mid-American Review: “The Problems of the Mothers” (“The mothers had gone so long...”)

Mom Egg Review: “Apocalypse Church,” “Instructions for Motherhood,” “The Problems of the Mothers” (“The mothers didn’t starve purposefully...”)

North American Review: “Leitmotif of the Mothers” (“We are dead already.”)

Verse: “How to Behave Post-Heartbreak,” “Leaving,” “The Naming,” “Parenthood Anthem,” “Parenthood Anthem,” “Schism,” and “Securing Romantic Involvement”

The concept of 'mother' resonates with such power that mothers are often seen as wholly or solely responsible for the physical and psychological well-being of their children. Indeed, mother love in some form is essential to a child's survival. It has also been enshrined in culture. Yet a mother has a range of feelings for her child. Not all of these are positive. The outbursts of inevitable impatience fall outside the culturally approved versions of mother love. The difficulty of pursuing many of her own interests and goals as she attends to a child's needs may cast a shadow across the blissful satisfaction that a mother is expected to feel. These expectations generate impossible ideals of mother love, and some mothers feel they have to draw a mask over some of their real feelings in order to be acceptable to others.

--Terri Apter, from *Difficult Mothers*

Motherhood is a bright torture.

--Anna Akhmatova

*

The Problems of the Mothers

The mothers didn't starve purposefully; the sons and daughters ate like hatchlings from their mouths. The children ate the bread baked and left each mother without a crumb. They ate the hens that died in the blizzard before she could boil them free of feathers. They fed at her inability to walk across the room. They drank rainwater from the cistern and sipped her salted weepings, garnered and sipped her sugary blood. They grew and grew, but still demanded to be suckled to sleep so that she had to lie contorted beside them. They cried until she gritted her teeth. They clung to her until her hair fell out in clumps that resembled the petals of dogwoods past their season. Their cries carried through the ventilation and escaped into the rooms through ancient wrought iron grates.

The mothers' hands grew more civilian each day. Their hands bittered to weeds in an overgrown garden. Their hands reflected wounds which were fatal, wounds they couldn't feel. Hours were unwelcome as guests. Voices reigned in their heads while they fought them and then let them ricochet as if their interiors were empty. The acoustics were healthier that way.

The mothers gathered at the banks of a river and dipped themselves in in the hopes of rendering their skins like iron since the battle would be a battle for years. Instead, they found themselves weeping at their unkempt reflections and at a sense of communion with the moving waters, they felt free of the little hands and mouths that haunted and crippled and pursued them; they felt moved by the natural sounds. The rivers spoke of baptisms to them, when there had been hope, and an imagined infant that had little to do with the real. Before the loss of sleep. Before the loss of all they could call themselves. Before the hunger that had the gnaw not of a single rodent but of all the rodents, numberless as rain. Their memories were like endless telephones ringing. They worshipped and got clean before they fell where they stood.

They walked a few steps along rutted roads that resembled their desiccated veins. Their spines bent. Their abdomens trembled. Before they were dead, they all had been ghosts. This was where the flesh came in; it had an end, like a rope.

*

Offspring

We are born of
the cold: we grow old
in its false crochet.
We are stripped clean,
denied names,
leavened like bread.
Cutting teeth, we flee,
lungless animals who
breathe through our skin.
Wedded to the perception
of predators and an arrow's
narrow aim. Wedded
to a drop of water
fallen on a burning bush.
We feel unsafe.
Torsos clothed in targets,
fat like red balloons.
Nocturnal, perhaps.
Lacking in scent.
The accidents of our births
power the world.
We are simultaneous.
Our torsos hum low
a butterfly grief,
their scapes akin to
leather's rough curl.
Calms and crucibles
we shed. Conjure
a fit. Snap the lock.
Each notch is a deluge.
An unsightly botch.
Affliction, like a sip,
begets its crib of ruin.
We know our burden
is about to end when
drops of blood appear
like lanterns at sea.
We bring plague down
with a word.
Sweet pearl of
a bird's eye, hear us
in the underbrush
and turn.

The Selves of Me Hang Like Bells Without Tongues

Feed them, clothe them, for how long did
I nurse them and for how long was their skin mine,
for how long did their teeth grow to bone in my womb,

for how long were their fingernails sewn from protein
I would lend. And for how long, now that the teeth
slit the gum like a letter from the envelope budding forth,

do they come to me in grief and I soothe them and hold them
and guide them through. How long did their bodies float
there in me as I dreamed we dreamed (I was an I, I was

a we), how long did it seem. Now I realize it was forever.
Their lids crease in their dreams and their digits twitch
and the scent of their scalps rise like bread, and the sheets

twist in among unmuscled limbs and morning.
Light comes and their eyes open first and fill with me.
What is it but joy. What else could it be.

In Praise of Offspring

Praise them, for they must be praised.
Praise their tiny hands. Praise their sharpened teeth.
Praise their voices like barbs in the skin.
Praise the hymns they think but never sing:
their intensities, their physics, their clusters.
Praise their possible crowdings and their scents
and the rip they give to every occasion.
Urine. Blood. Praise by the millions their
sinister moods. Praise how they enter and
do not exit. Praise how they question and
how questions claw. Praise how they equal
home and motion and colossus. There is
no way to praise them whole. They are
delicious. They are relentless. Tantrums
and sheer noise and years' worth of want.
Praise them until you are taken,
strung out, tiny, and gone.

You can try to map them here and here
and here but what their needs drill is a well
without a bottom. You are wallpapered
with their electricity. You are briefcased by
their scenery. Your new gravity is
their ever-heavy star. You would go far
but you are pulled back by the elastic
they have made of your heart. Praise them,
their series of emergencies, praise an everyday
that must icebox you to naught. Praise what
you would have fought against had you been
braver/younger. Praise this hunger. It has no end.

Sisyphian Labor

I make them waffles. They don't eat them.
I make them oatmeal. They don't eat it.
I make them cereal. I pour them milk.

I pull on their coats. They cry over which shoes.
They cry over the water that empties through
the stones. *I wanted the water to stay there,*

they say. They cry over the shirt
fitting too loosely. They cry over the shirt
fitting too tight. They cry over the socks

not being right. The waffles have cooled.
Morning congeals. They need the exact
book, the one I can't find. They need

their teeth brushed a particular way. They
need, when they play, a certain music
playing. The shoes hurt. The socks

hurt. They need a certain stuffed animal
I haven't seen for months. They need
sand in the sandbox. They try

and climb the slide too tall for them.
They try and eat the mushroom
unsafe. They stir and rage when

day comes and it's time to get
them up. They scream and rage;
they are delicate. They do not like

how their hair feels when it's wet.
They do not like the new sneakers
they begged for and we bought.

They do not like the way day falls
or the way night comes on or the way
the cat scratches at itself. They cry

to get what they want. They want to
buckle themselves in though we are late.
They cry when the right car-riding song stops.

They are disturbed. So they ask for

Goldfish, then they ask for yogurt.
The yogurt spills. They ask for glitter.

They need me to clothe the doll.
Pry the Legos. Cap the marker.
They call my name to hear me call.

In Praise of Offspring

Praise the anarchy in their grip. Their fine hair.
Praise the way they care for you, steamroller or vacuum.
Praise a world that fails to pay attention.

Praise the mannequin you see when you catch
a glimpse of yourself in the plate glass
window. Praise your shadow glued
to the street. Praise the lunatic you feel
when they will not eat or dress or sleep.
Praise the lunatics in your language.

Praise the fields you are sure sleep
at the back of their eyes, bearing crops
and of moments too soon.

Eyes ricochet. God god god god.

This is the evaporation.

How many selves can the tongue muster.
How many selves can the coop hold.

Praise the coops.

Praise the small stopwatch workings
of morning inside the hand.
Praise the small clothes. Praise the curl
of the ear underneath the hair like a seashell
come ashore. Praise cliché. It is all cliché.
Praise it all. It is also true.

The Naming

My heart is filled with the many hearts of the river's travelling children.

Their faces pass in a series of jars and they are heartless and they have the ashes of factory smoke and the bricks of the mill yard and library windows once all the panes are broken.

Their whispers are the images we carry. Their spines are the spines of books. Pages loosened, they no longer exist. We find our reflections there in several waters.

Their names are autumn leaves falling. I count their names floating. I count their names unswirling and submerged. It is always autumn where I live.

Their fathers are the thick trunks. Their brothers are the lilies at ease. Their mothers are the chill shadows, the cool acres, the sigh of a thousand bedrooms in the trees.

* * *

I can tell you I was left at the mouth of the river with my heart made of silver, with my heart made of boats, with my heart made of the many boats drifting in the open fists of fallen leaves.

I can tell you these are my sisters, I can tell you these are the pigeons circling, I can tell you they are my brothers, these whispers, these whispers as they echo through the mills' lost eaves.

Their cries a chloroform of laughter. Their glass bottles angling water like a history inoculate of light.

Soon, the snow. Soon, the smoke of snow as it rehearses in the gutters.

* * *

I am here now. It is autumn. The hands of the children gray at the twigs, figure equations against a sky that is the sky of long-forgotten factories, that ache, that wake like teeth in the late night din.

Their hearts are where the autumn lives. I wisp there in the gape.

How the Haystack of the Heart Loses its Needle

I was born of a conspiracy or larceny.
My fingerprints on file. I kicked my way
out of the womb while the closed blinds
sighed with a future wind. I was never
reproduced. I was born dead. I died before
the initial breath. My swaddling was a room
of ghosts. Raised by wolves. Raised by hoodlums
and card sharks and thieves. An allegory
murmured at the level of my bones.
I had not yet felt my heart wheeze and whoop
inside its mislaid chamber. I found myself alive
in the midst of salts or climates singing,
listening fitful for their twinge.
I recognized myself as one of the satellites,
one of the snakes, I recognized myself from among
the days to come, from among the days already over.
An arrow notched for the hollow it knows.
I was named for the crow and its handsaw complaint.

Episodic Memory

Childhood: like a snake, its skins
lace the ground. Its movement
splinters like milkweed to embellish,
disturb. In its single hour,

the most foreign tongues of it falter.
Without ligaments or voltage. Damaged
limbs and derelict organs. Monster
sewn together from blood and dark.

An action like wolves hunting the mongrels
in themselves. Hieroglyphs of lichen. Broken
clocks and one silk dress. Bacteria found
living on the preserved skin of the dead.

There is a trace of the estranged
in me, holy. A trace of folly, kept.
In its fog of time, childhood sings,
communion of bastard and bite.

Lullaby

You, my child, my stranger, lost. Listen:
others have parables we cannot trust.

A story begins and the wolf is captured,
and the witch is turned to clay.

Crows walk the branches and the pages turn.
One oven door closing, one pear-shaped leaf.

You, my stranger, my fleet of startle rising.
You think you know the vision by its smell.

In your eyes, an appetite like ecstasy,
and, child, the dream awaits.

Braced against what is yet to come.
None of the wicked know your name.

Within the story, you are a prayer half said.
Among the corn, among the high bronze it makes.

*

The Problems of the Mothers

When the children could not pass stool, the doctors told the mothers the pain was within normal range. When the children could not keep the room still, the doctors told them children turn and turn. When the children could not smooth their chests, the doctors told the mothers bones grow and the ribs break through and the shapes of things lose their symmetry. When the stomach spasmed, go home. When the breath was labored, go home. Go home. Sleep. When the fevers came, go home. When the vomiting emptied the small stomachs and the crying emptied small lungs, go home go home. They cannot eat they cannot sleep they cannot drink they cannot see. Go home go home go home.

The mothers developed ulcers in the palms of their hands and chapped sores at the roof of their mouths. Their hair filthy. Their thoughts flatlined like the pulses of the dead. What others said did not impress them, what others said could not reach their ears. The mothers could not feel joy. They could watch their children like stone. They could watch through the layers of watching and could not be sure what they saw. A smile into a small hand. A secret curl. A dark eyelash down over the pale and perfect cheek. A sigh at least. They could give a sigh. *Mommy*, the children said. A sigh in return.

The mothers would hold the little bodies and try to remember joy. They would know the bodies from their bodies. They would remember the moment the bodies had been lifted from their bodies and the one had become two and the fast heartbeat and the slow heartbeat had come together in the outside world. Now. That was a moment. The skin against the skin. The elbows of the knees pushing out and the stitchless thread of the mouth.

Before the handbags beneath the eyes held only blindness. When staring all night was good.

*

Prayer of the Fine-Toothed Comb

The lice are rare and scare like wolves
and suck our blood and hitch our strands
and when one comes up on the comb
dead in its transparent sheen, and when
the eggs there cluster and seed close to
the scalp or farther just pods, and when
we tell the children we are checking
for ticks, the woods sing with the yearly
crickets and we weave of ourselves
the forested dark and the water runs,
rust and rise at the property's back,
and our four hearts beat and share
their blood--such cells as you would find,
not mine but in my brain and in my heart:
we cannot find what would starve us,
we cannot find what would mend
the way the grass will not grow beneath
the sickly oak or the way one boulder
keeps the goldfish pond in shadow.
Mesh of metal, you are the sun, mesh
of metal, you have won me over;
I lace my fingers through your cage,
pray for hysteria, pray for autumn.

In the Science Museum

Like the pendulum, like the stripe
of sand melted to glass when the lightning
passed through. Like current sparked

by the machine. The bed of nails
another can crank up as you relax
to see if harm comes to you.

What fractal means. Or the wave display
they no longer have, but you remember
in your childhood would build water

like bricks and ripple it through
and let it lie. The great cut redwood
shows its closures in the width and shape

of its jagged rings. We imagined things,
but that was not the point. In the halls,
taxidermic animals swooned. Jellyfish grew

from contours of light. Miles lay
between us. Spoons from a pirate ship.
Dinosaur bones. Incubator goslings

clustered within its rectories, infected
with hearts. We are what follows
when first born. We are what waddles

across the lawn. We are what softens
to down when dried. What cries
mother in the sharpening grass.

Parenthood Anthem

We could not lay it before us, take its organs out,
use tenderness to drink from the cup of its body,

use vengeance to shape it into something we could want.
Against the grain, this same skin, this taste bitter, of lint.

There is too much to keep alive. We startle. We part.
We are the last blunt vein leading to such chambers. It is the enemy,

the crutch, it steals us from our nest. It tries its best
to track the prey. It shackles and it rusts. It has the mug

of a famous composer. O whimper. O gone. It is stronger
than us. We struggle. We stop. Fear is an evening. It feeds

at our larder, mausoleum, it costs. The one goodbye we keep,
steep in, summers in such a body as ours. What we mean

has a mind it leaves bleeding in our hands. Only to sift
like sand beyond our reach. The facts of this are facts of breath.

Invisible, and yet. The bone slowly knitting the calcium back.
A little thistle called the mind. Its scarves bright. Its done

silhouette. Its enemy of what narrow eye. The past tense
of the action cries. We are the Dobermans at the fence.

We are horses galloped west. Such darkness goes mad
with so many roads. This is the evidence. Anatomical as risk.

Household Psalm

Sizzling in the pan, the oil, the oil of us,
the plate terra cotta, the rain outside,
and the knives shining from the napkins
and the cups filled and the water rising up,
and inside us a hatch through which the cats
come creeping: they are what we feel they are.
What it does outside. Rain beads on the deck
we painted last summer but which the snow destroyed,
and water bubbles and who are you beside me,
stranger, lover, and who is that I hear inside.
I cannot abide. Empty milk cartons fill the recycle bin
and the mittens of children overflow into the hall
and the piles of unread newspapers and the bits
of broken toys. Unclean clothes pile on the stair,
I am what's not here, I am what's not here.
Always I fear another's voice requesting, demanding.
Quiet, quiet, it's all I want. Laundering the sheets
that have been soiled, and the food undercooked,
and the way people look when I growl as I walk,
and the shimmer of glitter somehow covers the floor,
but everyone can see the world I inhabit in my head
when they peek in my door. Neighbors like mannequins
stand in the window displays of my kitchen. We pose
and pose through good mother conversations: what
they eat, how they sleep, underneath how we want
to escape, but no one says this outright: I am stifled,
I am fake, what will it take to free me from this,
can it exist and I exist and neither of us fix.
The plants die for lack of water. The dried crumbs pile
on the floor. Cushions stain. Mirrors break. Heartlessness
aches as things that take me over abyss. Abyss. Abyss.
You christen it in me and take me out.
You christened it in me, now take me out.

Parenthood Anthem

Syllables clot. Fists go raw
so far from ease. Statues in the foyer

bleed. Ash scatters, bone keeps.

Childhoods shy like deer.
Questions hammer coffin nails.

The temperature drops. Pockmarked snow
scribbles unkempt in gutters. Words fall loose
like clothes sewn for someone older.

Smoke barks like children at the door.

Men slump in their coats. Pockets
woven shut as though to empty

the hands of soot and brush the salt

from the hair of another and work to sculpt
loved ones from this season of chaos,

of dirt. We clench our fists. Claw out our eyes.

We orbit at the speed of dark.
At best, apostles weep. The past,

in its density, has the waste and heft of wood.

Arrival, like departure, lurks in
the rooms. Love prevails. It is a litany

of the laces we cannot bear to loose.

The Reproduction Cinema

Already subterranean, we dig farther, with earth in
our mouths, bodies thawed to dust, close-wrought chambers
caving in. We dig with small landslides of breath.

We dig past poverties of sepia, thought, the sleep
and sing of avenues, light torn like daylilies
we did not plant. Past roots like stringless harps.

Where tunnels should be, where tunnels
have been. A train approaches. We dig
by finding inside us arteries and sons,

we shovel clarity from the eyes and pickaxe shining
from the teeth. Under our fingernails, the stories of thousands.
With the intense fever of funerals and wakes,

the innards of the earth accept us as their own,
the crust broken, the clay gone, all the sculpted triage
of moments feasting down and down to another core:

a type of heaven, its horseshoe crab shell empty,
overturned. We dig the sheath of every nerve,
a single night alone. We will stop when

the layers accrue, their DNAs grazed
or let wild, their florescent depths animate
and strange. Until then, hollow bells cringe

against the carnivores, the maggots, the dogs
loose from their leash. The digging is a hearth
where we come to warm our hands.

Parenthood Anthem

Enough: the steam of milk. Enough: the silt. Enough:
the hallway tremor of a voice. Enough: the lapse into madness.
Enough: the skin's small ember. Enough: to clutch. Enough:
no harm. Enough: no hair touched, no hazard swallowed.
Enough, the way it happens. The door's spring, the things
that box us in or out. Through doubt, the other is enough.
Its change to a sparkling map of all we could have, cloudless
as a flock. We. Enough. Enough, to heed, to bear the pain,
enough to name that which would kill us. Enough to tame matter
until it equals change. Enough, the overweight silence,
the pooling rage, the luck. Enough: event horizon. The patient
stitched. The cave paintings: uncivilized. Filch of spectacular
from the well. Enough, besotted with hindsight. Enough: fog
of breath, loss of shape, refuge from the hours. Scent of urine. All
for naught. Enough, fought against the fissures, caught against
the filters, taught within the middle, shot out from the quiver.
Enough: crush of a feather. Enough: windless later. Bone world
waxing. Lost cause. Subtle wonder. Nothing. Underfed.

The Burial

We are at the funeral of ourselves.
Our hands are folded in our laps.
We whisper so as not to disturb
the bereft. Our clothes are stiff,
our collars starched; we have never
spent time in a room like this where
the mourners are also the dead.

Flowers smell like stickiness, sweet
as the memories of open fields.
We are struggling to swim against
the current of a river. I watch
your mouth engage sadness
like a shadow, like a ghost.

When we are done, chairs
will fold against the wall.
The boy grinds down his teeth,
grieves with them all night.
The girl dreams of animals
and her wide eyes polish the dark.

Fingers clock the brain;
flowers will be trash.
Home is a concept flung
over one's shoulder against the cold
like a tartan or pelt. Each emotion
pushes up against an equal force.

Elegy for a Marriage

--the weekend of the Boston Marathon bombings

we wanted to get on the plane and so
it began. we wanted to get on and the world
tilted and the sickness started
and we wanted to travel and who knew
what lurked and who knew what documents
had expired and who knew what governments
were there and we wanted to get on. and the lockdown
grew and they found the bomber in a boat
in someone's backyard but that hadn't happened yet
so the city was shut down and we drove through the ghost town
streets and did not shelter in place and we all were sick
and bending down to vomit into the highway island grass
and we wanted to get on the plane but the children
sobbed and were distraught and documents expired
and photographs were lost and the fading had happened.
the city was lit and one of them asked whether it was night
and the other asked whether it was morning. we sat
in chairs we'd borrowed, we crouched in corners, our bags
unzipped and the plane would leave without us and
over the ocean grandparents would age and turn over
in their sleep. and in that backyard huddled in his boat
a killer frightened crouched and they would find him
with heat-seeking images shot from a helicopter
and they would find him from a carjacked Mercedes' gps.
They would see his shape and send in the soldiers and send in
the troops and send in the ten thousand police pulled
from neighboring towns and the city would sleep that night calmly
and the people would finally leave the house and we would see
that there was no getting on the plane, we wanted to fly, we wanted
to be high up and then down again. we remembered the children
with the tiny crabs we'd placed in the palms of their hands.
we remembered the children watching the giraffes.
we remembered the children playing on the floor of the living room
at your parents' house and sleeping soundly for once.
we remembered the calm of the rain coming in through
the chimney and its particular sound on the sunroom roof
and I remember fearing fire in the tall thin house and thinking we might
never get out through the winding staircase and vertical rooms.
then the plane took off and we were not on it. we were
stumbling into the car, we were stumbling into our sleep,
we were confused for a place we thought we should be,
we were confused about what the future would bring, we could only

be with one another in a past we had yet to create.
it was a mantra, what we said, it aged as it came from our mouths.
we could imagine the way it would settle on the air, we could
imagine the altitude those in the plane would have and make
between them and say and we had none of that.
we could imagine the sadness in watching our son twitch,
our daughter pace and how their mouths opened at the ticket counter
in grief and it was pure, their grief, it was like a violin,
it resonated as people watched: *I want to go to Ireland*,
as you and I watched helplessly. we had been sick.
we hadn't eaten, the city had been falling apart, the bombs
had been packed with homespun shrapnel forks and nails
and made from kitchen appliances and I felt then
the dangerous household around us made stale
but that could become dangerous again. I felt then
the household made calm, put to sleep, the household rocked
in our arms for too long so that we grew to want to put it down,
the household that wouldn't wake, the household
in the odd place between here and there. there was no there,
we were not in the air, this last trip we were not in the air,
we were no closer to where you had once belonged, the shore
along which you grew up with stories of rowing across the inlet
and stories of playing tennis once in a groomed yard that was now
a wild place with a crumbling wall grown over. I knew it wouldn't last.
I knew because of the shrapnel and the lockdown and the shape
of the children's mouths, this vomiting in the grass, the way we turned
around to go home because there was nowhere else to go,
the expired document packed away with the others as if still of use
and I looked at my watch as we got in the car and my son asked
has the plane taken off and I said yes, the plane is gone,
it's gone, watch it rise without us. gone.

Rehearsing the Quarantine

When you legalize the separation, its documents bar
a graph or line through which to measure the leak.

The initial quake. The pain of tremor. The crack
of slate. The groundwater. The ounce of stink. The mention

you make of the rupture. The radiation. Its nib. The carve
it rakes across expensive skin. The line of dye. The afflicted

limb. The running. The trace elements. When you sign
and shuffle documents, their tectonic plates, a magnetism

consumes you. The rearranged. The tiles of the sky enamel
and glazed. The wand registering a child's radioactivity.

The exposure to. The escape from. The magma in a voice.
The posture of a three-piece suit. Expensive shoes.

The whole world and its heave. Its weave of greetings
and farewells. The let-up. The revelry. The traffic

with its red velvet robe of brake lights lit. The distance
one can travel. The fascination. The rattle. The ways

we can contort. The rush to board. The crush of
a mob. The cost. The sob. The initial descent.

Elevators renovated until unrecognizable.
Doorknockers dropped. Barges adrift.

Bridges uncrossed. Traffic relaxed.
In a skeleton of excrement, in a eulogy of grease,

in the same muddy beat behind the sound,
the boil of looking beyond the now.

The affliction like a sip of sleep we drink,
this total scratch of ash in the mouth.

As stadiums darken and children across America
face the velocity of dusk, as salamanders stay damp

beneath decaying leaves, as pulled blinds gather
dust, as the lake aches with the call of loons

and moistures rise. As the supply truck takes
a slow wide turn and traffic stops. As men

in black suits bow their heads, as the curtains
at the windows are drawn, mouths sewn shut,

heads bowed, the words said. As animals eat
animals. Their fascist teeth starring the flesh.

Schism

Something angelic is put out by my hand,
and I can't tell if you are pale or sleeping.
We stand at the mouths of caves I call stars.

There is a piano somewhere and I mistake it
for the eyeblink of horror when you scream out of sleep.
The room punctures through like a luminous drum,

to a bedside lamp and body heat. The very rumor
of dusk is enough to cause night, and now a downward thing
bleeds easily. Window light uncombs like wool.

Our imbrication makes oarsmen of the insects and ratchets
of their sound. Reeds invent lungs by desiring to breathe.
There are trees where the water should be.

The Logging

And then, for the first time, I could step to the edge,
for the first time the light streaming in, for the first time
the corpses of trees and in the air for weeks the smell
of sap, and every day from dawn to dusk the sound
of the machines ripping the woods up
and behind the houses along the street, light:

and behind the houses along the street, an open air
that feels unnatural and feels exposed and we could feel
the breeze, its current on our skin. Strange insects
alight because they have no home and the sound
is a virus in the blood, all my cells sickle, all my modes
haunt, and the low grumble like a beast and it comes.

And in the house, the dishes filled with syrup solidify
and melt, and the rain falls and still the machines do not stop.
And the son turns one year older and the daughter
can write her name, but the engines shift and downshift
and grind, and oil lubricates the working parts and exhaust
spills and all down the neighborhood the whine and rake.

All down the neighborhood, the crack and fall.
The neighbors are hunched in their living rooms
and basements against the violation, the noise that crawls
into the blood and creeps into the brain and causes
the throat to swell at night and causes the hands to cringe
at the joints, and diseases and gets inside, and the house stays
a mess and the mothers go to bed and the fathers watch movies
late into the night, until the crack you hear is the eaves
of the house and the machine rips in and tears it up.

The windows split. The acres fault. And the hard wood floors
so carefully laid break down and the paint so carefully brushed
peels up and the voices stop their intimate murmur
and the pillars that hold the house go to moss, and we sit
and stare and the evenings stop because the trees aren't there
to block it in, and out the back window, an open space
where a house will be built, where a house had been.

*

The Problems of the Mothers

The instruction books talked about putting the baby down but the baby could not be put down. The instruction books talked about putting the baby to sleep. The baby did not sleep. The instruction books talked about singing to the baby. There was no song that would shut it out. The instruction books talked about taking time for oneself, but there was no time, or self. The mothers began hallucinating: the baby unbuckled, the baby unfed, the baby lost. They saw the baby being held by other women, women it did not know, women who could not feed it or say its name. They saw the panic in its eyes, but could not take it back.

They saw their own mothers as babies. They saw their own mothers as mothers are, crushed. The mothers didn't know they should settle for less. There was still something inside them that aspired to thinking or sitting or looking at trees. The mothers squirmed among the melted popsicles and skinned knees, among the open-mouthed raging and the meals to be made and the lack of talk and the gastrointestinal distress. Breakfasts rejected. Lunches ignored. Clocks that moved too slowly. When morning hatched, it was an egg that birthed the realization that dawn could be just as dark as any other hour, and that things were not going to change.

What the mothers didn't know repeatedly hurt them. Whether the child was taking a breath. Whether the blankets had covered its face. How small to cut the food. Whether it was a tooth. Whether it was gas. How clearly to say the word. What to invent. What to make true. Whether the cold would cure the cough, whether the bath was too hot, whether the baby could see underwater, whether another mother would feel this or not. The babies proved unable to stay asleep. They wrapped their babies in newspaper so they would stop crying but not be silenced, they hovered their babies over balconies so they would fall but not too far.

The instruction books were inflexible. Let the baby pull your hair. Let the baby eat your heart. Do not let the baby sleep too long. Do not let the baby put things in its mouth. Watch the baby so that it does not fall from the chair/couch/floor/bed/car. Watch the baby so that it grows used to being watched and cannot be alone. When you cry in desperation, do not make any sound. The mothers were mannequins of nod and smile. Their ability to hear grew so keen that they were woken by an unsmooth breath or the way the flat sheet of a bed stirs when another breathes or the way the throat almost coughs when the dream nearly wakes. Whimpering. Crying. The children saying the mother's name. The way they said her name was a bell whose cord was wrapped around her throat. Her throat had a heart that beat inside it. If she didn't obey, she was choked.

*

Domestic Metrology

“My God, who wouldn’t want a wife?”

--Judy Brady

Bride of mine, you heal when scraped, you stay
when left, you end where beginnings flock. You soften

where hardnesses rest. Bride of mine, you are also my child,
made of handbags, made from fuel. You are figuring

in the garden the way a carcass might, cold, wrung with troubles,
legs twisted, bearing a shock. Bride, you are my child

layers down, your mummies unwrap, your syntax of glass,
your seizures in check like a bevy of plagiarisms waiting

to be said. Bride, you are my husband. Bride, you are my mouth.
Bride, you say and say until there is little left and the fluids of you

burst from their sack. Bride, you are another sort of body.
The television makes you ask, follicles of trash, follicles of waste,

follicles of asymmetry expelled. The head of a rhinoceros,
mounted. The chemical scab. Bride of mine, you have been

an instrument. Bride of mine, you have livestocked me
through sludge, you have given me an illness, you have

fed me with gluten, you have swelled and swelled until
the fungus rings true. I am raked at. Dam bred. Dam

milked. Sentenced to death. There are four-legged
parasites for every sarcophagus. I am the only one left.

Love as the Jellyfish

Ligament, parasitic tulip, electric and adrift,
a colony, a chronology of traces underneath.

A sift of hisses, rib with a slight fracture, a calcium
embryo. Glottal limbo which swims and preens.

Its nocturnal blossoms frost over as herons tangle,
smoke. Its moon flees between branches.

Beads spill from the weeping fringes, ill-fitting
windowpanes, linens etched. Fingers at the snow

of wounds. A frail sun that grooms itself at the edge
of a threadbare carpet. Ode to what cannot be touched.

The Showdown

The person in the house grabs brass rings for gold. Errs and leans. The person in the house is throwing things. The person inside the house sees her face in a plate. The person inside the house grates paper and pretends it is a block of cheese. The person inside the house mends the wallpaper where it is torn, or scorns the walls and mends the couch. The people outside shift from foot to foot. There is an ounce now in the house that the person inside measures. It leaks out through the hurricane lamps. It leaks out through the poorly laid floors.

The person inside invents a form of paranoia. The people do not seem like people through the peephole. The people do not seem like people through the patterned glass. The stomp of a foot. The ring of a doorbell. The drop of a knocker. The place where time stood. Stillness is invented by the letters the postman drops through the slot. The area rug is bombarded. There is warfare in the room. It is not too soon when tomorrow comes colding. The mind, it is polar. The morning a-swoon.

The person in the house makes furniture out of the walls. She starts a fire, though not beneath the chimney. She starts a heart, though not inside its cage. She eats the meager light the dull December bulbs bring. They grow shoots and show her how shine can travel on a pin. On the tip of a sorrow. It all is a showdown. The acres begin. She sweeps the counter and sponges down the floor. The playing hour is waltzing. The waltzing hour is night. The movement of all this is knitting moments, weighing them as paper scraps that can slip beneath a door.

Ode to Sleep

Place its toothpicked pit in water, watch the grist of its insides grow. Witness its populous bloom, honeycombed with rough.

Its cobblestones grip the heart in its mitt, a closed fist thickened and gritty as silt. The swamp of the plumb beat

adamant as weeds. The dish of which is salted by stimuli or flight. It is a house in which we cannot live, the fletchings

on the arrow we cannot launch. It grows late over Nevada as we watch. Lights its gullies: we grow burnt as a moth.

Mimics a sleep of archives and the small lies lovers forget. Mimics all laughter broken by the time it leaves the mouth.

With all its moving parts, its chimes, its gleam, sleep muddies our archways, lying low, gives off

noise and steam; its mechanics clear the fence. It must be wooed. Must be quieted. *Hush*. It must be

soothed. Has a snag. Has a bleed. A drape. Flaps awkwardly, at its edges, a heron. At its center, a wide bottom perfect with fish.

The Pact

Mother, I have destroyed you. Forgive me as I am destroyed. The submarine of you, mother, has, underwater, shipped me off, has fired on me, is nuclear. The gold tooth of me is stolen, the frayed cord of me is broken, the scored record of me is frozen, the scratched recording of me is full. Fire on my self pulled from a pile of the wreckage, fire on my plumage-self planned in advance. And decorated for the homecoming and sheltered by the colors and the blending in with ending and the touch of a Cyclops to the backs of wool. Clinging to the belly of the sheep, I come home. Mother, my blood is the blood sum of you and my father. I have no choice. I need your rules. And now the tides come in and like driftwood I drift and like summits I rest and like the Eucharist I am blessed and like the lost reflection I am lit from below by what appears to be light. I say my name and it ignites. I say my name and it tires like a rower on a stolen ship or lags like a haggard sail. I lost my veil, I lost my bed, I lost what I thought had been said to you to make you understand. You, the shape eating waterfowl with bare hands. Mother, your grand chandelier of lies has so many eyes it sees like a spider or a fly in every direction, it decides, goes for miles. What opens before you is my smile. Empty as a room. Empty as a foot. Empty as a ruse. Empty as a lung. Empty as a tongue that has not said. Empty as a vein that has not bled. What am I, mother, but the undead walking the way you want me to walk, the way you want me to talk, up from the grave at your command. The zombie I am, covered in soot. Soon I swoon and faint and fall. But that is not all. I am the spoon you cook. I am the food you concoct. I am the line you lost with the hook at the end, meant to sink into a mouth. My cheek is set, my wretch is good, I am not what wooed you. I am no good. This I know. I had to sew myself shut. For years, I was the rut in the good old road. Do not trust the old, do not trust the new, there is nothing to do and nothing can be done. The two were one, now they are two. I was born, I was new, then I spoke, I was no good, I was me, I had flaws countless and contagious as disease, not the least of which grew. I was me, I was mine, I was not yours. I could not be you. Mother, you took from me the drought and gave it meaning, you smacked the pout right off my feeling, you kept stars lit on the ceiling so you could navigate out from my room. It was noon when the sun set in you. I felt the earth cool. I felt the fires lit so those of us who survived could go on living. I felt the beasts arrive when night was confirmed. You killed us off. You felt you'd earned it, the right to make us into what fears and what crouches and what grows cold. I could not

grow older. I could not mature. I was sure there was nothing left. What I felt in the end was the blow of yours sent across the miles to find me where I lay spent and desert-like in the heat. Keep me here. I serve your needs. The edges of me, mother. I cannot be until you let me recover. I cannot run to the subset of another. You are too wise, you know what the constant light means, you know what grows where and how to twist it when the darkness meets it so that it can moss over and meld into a growth that will melt it down. You fungi plus silk, the lurch of me is trying to unlearn all the confusions of you. Mother, mother, quite contrary, how does your deadliness grow? With a tooth and a rack and a crawl and a sack and all the daughters caught in their rows.

Exhibiting Angeliki

She: no bleach to her blood, in the eye
a gallop of galleons with the cannons out
and the fuses lit and still the filled waves
widening. Her stem of staves, a fatal
glimpse of all she builds in a handful said,
rocked complete and made of the carnage
that comes when a person is too ironclad
for the latitudes of skin to hold her.

She shouts merely by being awake.
The room is a stage where she sits
while dawn creeps the bricks
like a windowsill flower, while the fire
escapes its tail and hiss. She is a force.
Her worshippers in shameless furs,
with lightning forking from their backs.
Her courtyard dark with its shadows
origami, her at the ashtray, at the oven,

at the gate, stepping out royal
and modern as a star, and filled
with fight; as the car pulled up,
the air would part. She was lithe
with the bulldog look of her,
throned alive by the shatter
of her voice, quicksilver, sifting

from a distant childhood. She would
go down on her knees in no church
but her own, and nothing lowered her,
not even death, and, by God, today
she still sheds the total earth,
a gathered jar of knotted depth
wrestled of the last not-wake.
The pillars of her flexed.

Detail

The way her eyes, brown and also blue, stone
and also golden, folded like sleeping bats
and rabid and also false. Marked like walls
or forests with fractal patterned breaks, a sound
of lakes, an amen of sirens, in her eyes
a source lost far from their corners,
her eyes a punctuation of salt, a taut
falsetto for martyrs, quickening, listening,
laboring, intense. Dense like a signature
of water. Cauldron-hot and animal-breath'd.
Vexed and tender, a candle of glass shards
and tabernacle skin. One shine increased to
a flower pot crack. One look and inside it
prime numbers infinite and roomy as a Lord.
The way her eyes spring sour wine from
the margins of her thoughts. Confidential.
Afternoon begins its additions, creations in
the night, fixes of flight that add to
the addiction. No court convened to hear
tragedies, hurt. No trees bent to feel the force
in her, a false completion, dictated and coarse.

Detail

The lake, dragging her eye, finds a marble
and a moth, hourglass veins and a sky
of haloes, candled panes and cobwebs
that fatten like lungs, a future made of geraniums
and husks, starlings and temporary hibernation.

Its dosage crying gaps. Its ground-pooled
blooms of bliss, a twist of barbs
she would nurse as her boxer's heart
if it weren't so likely to perish.
She heartbeats like a house.

She was resurrected once. She was
transfixed. Now she is martyred by the prompt
and rough. All she calls for lives in rupture.
Chalices placed at the wince or waste. Leaves
her to shepherd the twin of her: ash.

Enchondroma

When they put the bone in me, the whole body
had its chance to react to all the immune system
did not like. I thought this might have been a good
woman or man whose bone I had. It wanted its say. It
was a structure, the doctor said, a scaffold. *Mere proteins.*
The word *cadaver*. Sterilized. Fibers going into the hole
he'd drilled once he scooped the cartilage out. He said
strength. Sewn up. As I went under, in my head again
the operating room light I had seen the first time
like God coming through, and again not time to
count. They had a fix on my memory. They had done
a leach of it so that it would not work. I could feel
the cool liquid slip into my vein, I could see the IV
drip. They said I was anxious, had imagined it.
One last time I asked, *disease? Artificial bone?* A home
for someone else's built calcium and cells. This hand
I used to write my word, the identity place, the base
of me, the crux, and someone else would be there.
I would grow schizophrenic, I would not remember
how. I would go dark. The person would limp through
my thoughts, the person would thief me, the person
had a past and I carried it with me. Gratitude, yes.
But also *enough*. I woke with a cast and then they
took it off, and the finger was swollen and yellow
with a fine matted scar. Bent. Ugly. I didn't know it.
It didn't know me. The fibers there. I could not
write, I could not move. It bent like a vane toward
weather. It bent with a stiff swollen knuckle.
Two weeks later, the hell began. Lip swell.
Throat swell. Nothing would be the same.
Prednisone. Zyrtec. Epi-pen. Ranitidine. Then
tendons stiffened to misbehavior, radioed the muscles
of the hand, twisted fingers like rare parsnips.
The bones filled with their own minds, tree-creak
swaying in the wind. The knuckle knew and resisted.
Grew rigid. Listless. Did not listen to the brain's
command. Drifted off from a mechanics I understand.
Please work. Though you belong to another, hand I
adore. Cupped in my other hand as I mothered it,
as it knocked at things and grew pain like a bloom
and the cringe of me stewed there at its core.

Enchondroma

You trespass like rain trespasses at the gates of the lake.
We are the same. Cell-free, our fibers blend. You were
bleached in the end, and shaved and placed in the
hollowed-out space that was cartilage, not bone.

It is only temporary, what we own. What we are
or were. When I stir, you stir, and live again.
I go blind with this surrender of substance, tissue,
matrix, that makes my own bone fill in and heal.

I wield my health and you wield your death
and together we pull muscle and flesh and are
and carve and bend. I do not know who you've been.
And yet I am you now. My head bows in gratitude

and I think of them. My doctor who said
they had the lot number and the non-profit
where they test and clean. Disease-free. Rot-free.
Cell-free. Fibers. Slipped into the hole drilled in me.

I went under the knife. The incision's fine and
tight and yet my hand feels strange, the hand of
a stranger, does not taste familiar, does not touch
the same way. Were you a woman? Were you

a mother? Will I smother in what you do to my body
as it fights you off despite their promises of clean?
My lips swell, my throat swells, my tongue.
We are one and we are two and who are you.

Cartilage grew where bone should in my youth,
then bent when children cried, and split and I was
lit inside by pain and a sharp sound like the split
of wood under an axe and I came up and the x-ray

came. I saw the jagged mouth of the bone's shatter.
And inside, what the doctor called a tumor.
There is no us, whoever you are, there is me only,
fearing for my life, you a mere object, me a mere

object, there is no us, there are only those cells, absent
now, knowing us somehow, calling us home to memory
and context and without that, we are garroted of roots.
It happens too soon. I feel I should apologize to you;

I am using what you used, and what you were, with little reverence, fighting it off. I apologize to us both. I feel sorry for us. No one is safe. This wound heals past the days before I am bone only too, before I am too much like you.

*

The Problems of the Mothers

The mothers had gone so long without seeing stars that they imagined the long-tailed bear in their bedrooms with the sleepy brother pointing toward the hunter and the small dipper leaning nearby. The mothers had gone so long without natural light that their bones began to soften and their clothes began to smell of eucalyptus and their eyes began to read text in the fingerprints smeared along the pane. The mothers clustered together, though they were alone. In underground spaces. The plants around them wilted. Dishes grew mold in the sink. When the fruit flies began to swarm the kitchen and sugar ants came in through invisible cracks at the edge of the stove, the mothers took the children upstairs. So that they were away from the honeybees that came down the chimney and away from the rainwater stagnating in the pockets of the canopy on the deck, so that they were ready for floods or locusts, though it was only fire ants digging and chewing out beneath the weed-filled whiskey barrel and the turkey chicks feeding on the grass seed tossed out at each bare patch.

There were mothers leaning in the supermarkets and mothers panicking in the convenience stores and mothers taking toddlers by the wrists in the gift shops with the fragile figurines. On the mantel, pictures of the mothers though their faces faded from day to day and their chemistries could not re-fix such ink. The mothers' shoes collected cobwebs in the corners and their coats hung until the shoulders wrinkled in a permanent wave. The sleeves drooped and grew used to being empty. The pockets filled with soot.

The mothers grew allergic to the saliva of dogs and sneezed and whimpered as it was carried through the house by shed fur and air currents in the rooms. The mothers wove baskets from the limp and dirty dish towels and old books sighed on their shelves. Small rain boots filled the corners. Headless dolls covered the floors.

Rains came and the children became the sound of falling water. Snows came and the children became the way the breath can be seen. Every second of sleep seemed like running someplace unfamiliar. Every word pronounced knew a different word by name.

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Prototype Diagnosis

If God falls golden, what am I?
If the pegs of this world fall out of place,
if half of me shoulders a minute heaven
I cannot find, what is feel?
If the eel in me has a mind,
what is reason, is it rare?
If I dare to rage, what God is there?
I am a rod. I am a ram. I am
what lacks, what lies still, I am
what falls far. I am what stares.
There is nothing in me, not color, not
earth, not a fence to close off, so what.
So where. I am what tears along
the seam. I am what lies low or
folds under duress or caresses nearness
or calls out in the strained candidness
of violence. I do not cry out. What
snaps like laundry on the line is not
my sense. I reap real. I eat raw.
I toss from me black seasons. I balk.
I am what bends. I fend off religions.
Manhole covers steam my name. I remain
although I am lost. I am last in line.
I wear the tassels of a king. I am kind.
I sin. I grow lean and hunger.
I have been. I heave ho. I grow heavy.
I lurch like rain. I am livid. I wing fondly
across sensitive and solvent scenes.
I dream pockets sewn of dolor.
I barter and bother. I am homeless
and arranged. Avenged. Untamed.
Clocks tick the carnage and bother away.
I am left decent if a country is
a catch in the leaves' late lace.
I sew myself a song of Interrogation.
All thoughts are soldered, all treasons
erased. I sing it, the sound of fabric
torn. I whisper it, a worm-eaten moon.
I groom its grief electric.
I harness its mouth: a home.

Apocalypse Church

Our pews are fuming with colic. Our hair
gone Palomino-loose. Our pews: seemingly pure,
seemingly good, paper-dolled with folded hands.

Gradual, the destruction. It comes too soon,
the way we give ourselves to wills and
wants, fog such rooms, fasten ourselves

shut, hiss and glisten as serpents do
in a garden far from trussed. The past
asking after us and fed at the gate. The past

like a lake, eelgrass and cattails and the lick
of a lure, nostalgia's sure hand steady, with
nothing to cure. And there the house,

a material thing. The way it has of being
like disease; it unfolds in the vein. We are
wrapped in it, sapped of strength. We shine

like shoes, corset thin as a dress. Until
we run aground. If one of us dreams, she dreams
of inbred bees and the crumble of the hives

they abandon. Her calls still echo. Their genre
a tango, its tempo like laughter when laughter
is gone. A set of gestures to signal the martyrdoms

are done. You have been warned. There is no more
to tell. One can poke at the ashes in search
of embers. One must struggle to remember. One

must splint and sling and yoke the other. Become
the smother. Place a coin on the tongue.
Blunt nerve endings. Memory. Become.

Instructions for Motherhood

Gut the herring. Cover your body in ash. Thorn with the blood that grows from the roses. Layer dirty linens with hot water and lye. Beat the caustic bleach that forms.

Seed the ingredients for medicines and food. Clean away dandruff and lice. Stir a broth of beet. Soothe a raucous child. Catch the train that runs an hour behind. Calm the cross winds. Quiet rough storms. Ache for months in your elbows and knees. Make of kitchen twine an innerscape of lace.

Stew beans in a pot until they soften. Add tarragon and coriander and rosemary and thyme. Scald your hands. Sweep sand from the floor. Pile the wet sheets in a cast iron pot. Let an insect larvae curl its heart in your hand. Shape a well-seasoned pot from clay. Fire it gray in a nearby kiln.

Speak in a dialect. Reproduce clothes. Eat whole fruits. Wipe your chin. Master the extraction of oils. Let tar paper cool. Collect what grew in the eaves at night.

Gather the quince and brew sour wine. Dye cloth. Don an apron. Don a wide-brimmed hat. Taper a single braid down your back. Don a wool legging. Don a wool skirt. Distill perfume. Card your skin. Be accused of treason. Be at rest.

Leitmotif of the Mothers

We are dead already. There is no place to go.
The flowers grow around us and we are still
and the cells are ill and attack themselves
and the world hums like a plate gone to spinning.

We are done. We are numb with remembering
a beginning, but in us nothing stirs. Our fingernails
blacken and our leg bones curl. Our hair grows brittle
and our eyes dull. Our wrists flip like compass needles
and send us back and forth. There is nothing we adore.

We lie out in the garden, partially covered in dirt,
sure that soon the sun will fill our skins, except our skins
are shed and there is nothing left and no one has opened
the garden gate. The bees go rare and their sounds glare
in our ears. The trunks of trees spin their webs.

We are dead and the deadwood listens. We are hearts
and the heartwood lessens. We are joints unbent
and lips unwetted. We are what ends while trying
to begin. We are what sins in the background scenes.
We are on our knees in a church none can lend us.

No God inside us. No where to find us. Our long motif
repeated is our absence in the glass. As sad as notes
floating on a long release and snapped in place,
words dead like ash, and I am the last rotation to feel
and I am the eel in the ironworks slithering, slipping,
itching there. One line at a time and we grow aware.

We are the away, an ace to steal, our sleeves are rolled.
Our sleeves are bare. Under the table split down the center,
there where the corner shed rots itself away, there
where syllables fritter, you can find us again and again.

Aggressively angled and well behaved. The soil boils up,
the mulch, its strain, and the wet smell is in our noses,
and the soft grain drains from our fingers as they do not move.
The twitch of the worm shoves our mechanical brains
and the worm unsegments from within itself to push the dirt

and we are hurt by this and the underground water,
we are hurt by the dug well, we are hurt by the stone wall
fallen down, we are hurt by the separate stones tending
to themselves in the cold ground. We are bodies now,

engined and caved, and the worms will find their way
and our shin bones will be the reefs for surface creatures,
and if our throats call, they will only wane--the sound
will shame us, the sound will thin. The sound will be the wind
and not its competition. Its sound will fall, and disperse like rain.

I Have Never Been So Elegiac

Instead, I was a tinder box, a grasping tendon
of drying grass. A rattle of seeds and three
strands of hair. All I came for was in vain.

I fear I am the figure now behind each pane
of glass. If my heart were less of a tabernacle.
If my skin were not such an obstacle for light.

Why should I land if I am to branch like a bough,
if I am to fail and grow a measure of paradise
through labor or waking or pain. What is it that

eyes me at the divide where I begin. In a turn of frost,
the crust of dawn fractures and we crack with night
and the faint thought of day and its birth like a twist

of knives. I have been given the sound of my name
in exchange for its wild sequel. I have been given
the suffering of age as a way to remember my face.

No. The veins of water run right under. Mourn me,
plunder the burlap sack of my savage dark, plunder
and murder as they bead like rails and sleek

crooked swans and willows kenneled by the wind
and all the sins I have said were too much
and then committed. Truant day. Dogged

as an elm. Felled as a curled-up dream.
What seams you widen, what unstitched threads.
What windfall apples, cider now.

Song of the Replica

I, in my motherhood, hovering,
with the crocus root,
I with a body of wonders
that thicken as they thunder,
that wizen as they crack.

As the glass grind goes,
I am alone,
disrupted for the good of sight,
melted down,
hardly remembered in this subtle form.

As the blind hinge opens,
I, a mouth.
Ancient, I bargain
with an enraptured south
in order to begin
in the equatorial self.

I am the mere cord,
never to be cut,
I am the mere rut that rakes
its way from the road to the pond.

I breathe the small martyrdoms
that strike me blind.
What I touch gains a touch
of truth. A bit of rot.
If there is any God,
he does not look.

A gnarl of hands.
Atoms flush as a trout.
From a dark art spilled,
among the quartz, among the reddish bones.

Fight or flight. Salt of the earth.
Filled with artifacts, crooked spectacles,
jars and jars of preserves.

My Attachment

My attachment is academic. My attachment is situational and boxed as parcels. My attachment has the perspective of a penthouse nest, has the unpredictable interrogations of the sea. It has flaws of silk. It has dovescotes unresting. It has a fester of lessening and forgetting within. It has the shiver of housefly wings. My attachment has the inner winters at the glass eyes of taxidermied animals. It has shadows for battles and a translucent grin. My attachment is outstretched like the body of one who's been dead. It is tattooed with castaways and shores. It makes certain to listen. It is sure to be ignored. It mistakes grief for the splinters it drank long ago as a form of poison. It can be anointed. It can be annoyed. It is pierced with demolition. Like days. It is saved by the ways one can be tortured. It has been forced from stone, like a sculpture. It has been watered like a houseplant. It cannot spoil. It can sob through the long nights, grown hard with what grows harder. It can collapse with the give and shimmy of a structure. It grows cloudy as a voice. If it drowns, it drowns in youth. If it floats, the moment rises, without a torso, like the bullfighter gored. With blood on its cloak, it marks arrival. With blood-fueled dreams, it wields remorse.

Slaughter Is a Parable or Dirge

Strip down the fat and I am flesh.
Strip down the wool and I am want.
Strip down the salvaged metal scraps

and I am what was there before
the known world broke them up.
Grasses crackle, brown and floss.

Strip down the foundation and stability
reigns. Do not hear the sounds the animals
give off as the ramps slip their hooves,

as they smell one another, as they know,
as we know, the end to come. Limestone
for the chain gang. Chip away at the block.

When the faces wane like moons, we are lost,
when the brands blacken us and we are ash.
When. When. It is a stormy dish, this strain,

this sky, under which the back is bent.
Those who enforce what happens to us
dream like anyone else. The tidy

in their houses. Driveways paved. Kitchens
clean. Bedrooms free of the stain of moaning
and making. Sterile, they redeem.

Leitmotif of the Mothers

When the children age, the mothers age. Feel themselves
grown gross and stark, feel themselves falling less delicately

against the pavement, feel themselves rising like balloons
only to burst. When the children age, the birthdays

halve piñatas, unwrap paper and ribbon, unrest the mothers
until their clothing resembles the clothing of a corpse, stripped

at the elbows first, threadbare when finally we dig them up.
No one will grab the mothers by the lapels of their coats,

no one will kiss them in the train station as the riot police
line up, no one will tell them they are young. They will not

stir from this solemn sleep, they will eat from the trough,
lie in the slop, they will cast off any majesty and then just

fatten up. They will be trotted off and butchered
in the stale living rooms of their own unhappy choice.

*Boy or girl. Weight and height. First bowel movement. Size
of the head.* Once all of it is measured, it is all bled out.

They will be hung in a closet away from the light
to stiffen and dry, to fix and preserve

like the bouquets of flowers, rhododendron
and roses, they held as they said their vows.

Amnesia District

If I am alone, I am peopled. Who am I
if I am for others. Who am I: the car starts
and takes us someplace meaningless.

We cannot feel through the web
of each face. Minute by minute,
I am less. It is lethal. I am lost.

The cost grows so far down
it is my soil/loam/host/mar.
What I work to catch in my hands

bleeds out like a little seed of water
spat and the tiles of it seep into the ground.
I am ruled by doubt. There is a hunger

in them I cannot feed. The greed of the young.
The greed of *give me*. The swing goes up
and comes down and I let my breath out.

The running stops and I can stop.
The yelling stops and I can stop.
The fever stops and I can stop.

I am caught up. My chest is a rig
that has ceased to unfold. Drilling for oil
is the plight. Now we are spitting up

gold from our veins. I grew these curls in my belly.
They stay around my finger and hog the sun.
Like left wood. Like a lit mood. Like the fire

of a life careening and stunned.
It is all on me and I don't know how.
Motherhood, you are the witch house.

You are the child head in the oven.
You are the covenant with being afraid.
Nights unslept. You are steps untaken.

You are afternoons stretching far or wallets
edging over the grate. Innately, I cannot.
I am not just blind but also bought, also caught,

a good quail nesting close, but exposed and then
in the bag with a snapped neck before the dog
can sound, before the long grass can protect.

Trajectory

When the one limb sins while the body can't watch,
or the offspring is lost, or the tender flute of the dove's throat

hooks the ones who pass, or the passions blast through us, going
as they should, when the wood has a mood and mimics frost

and the language of so many branches is lace and the world
has a face but no one can look, it is so terrible, it is so good:

we are found at last, we are turned to stone.
When the hatchet cancels out all the faulted dark.

When floating is an art where the sleeves fold in the earth,
when one gives birth: such indolent sobs. One is stained

by them, or robbed. One is anchored to a curse.
When we shine our shoes, when we leave for good,

when we make our way through hundreds of fables
and still we are sleepless and still we are lost.

We toss and turn. What stirring there is. What
figurative language. What iron is wrought.

When the world bleeds its revelations. As if we sit
astride our death, but do not hold the reins.

Voice asleep in its small box. Its desert has words
that die of hunger. We let them be our name.

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The Problems of the Mothers

When the mothers grew too weak to say *no* or to say *yes* or to say *brush your teeth* or *put on your clothes* or *don't make me come down there* or *stop* or *what are you doing to me*, they took to their beds. Anyone would have taken to their beds. Most would never have risen again. But the children were climbing on the couch. They could fall. The children were running down the stairs. They could stumble. The children were inhaling great mouthfuls of food. They could choke. The children were pulling each other by the hair the children were too close to the water the children were at the window ledge the children were seeing something they shouldn't they needed to be fed they needed to be fixed they needed their toys adjusted they needed to drink they needed to need they needed to get sick and get well and the fevers were hell and the crowning of teeth and the I don't want to go to bed and the need to be touched.

When they tried to weep, the mothers conjured a dry scrape in the apex of their throats. When they tried to walk away, they came back. When they tried to take a breath, it came out. *Stop. Share. get off your sister. Get down. Be careful. Stop.*

The mothers tried to keep themselves still. The acid in their throats ate away at the esophagus. Spasm in the children's' bellies. Bump of bone at the chest. Every twitch of every muscle. Every episode of vertigo. Every allergy to the milk of the breast.

They inhaled when the lungs loosened. They looked out past all the dead crickets on the screen. They scrubbed on hands and knees the markers that had streaked uncapped across the linoleum floor and the rug where the one shit without a pull-up on and the place where the other spilled a full bowl of cereal into the chair and the place where the handprints stayed caked with dirt and the place where one said no and the other said nothing and no one was listening and nothing was done/right/okay/clean/calm.

The mothers. There were no mothers. The mothers were machines.