

Contagious Magic

Open a mother's jewelry box,
her cedar chest, her underwear
drawer, and you will likely find
any number of teeth, hair tied
with ribbon, whole braids shorn,
secured with aging bands, wrapped
in tissue or sealed in a zip-loc.
Sometimes, a small lump of cord
hardened.

When I was pregnant, I read up
on placenta traditions.
How some cultures burn them, grind
them up, keep them to ward off
future illness. How some require
that the father gently wash
and swaddle it, bury it
in a sacred place, honor his child's
dead twin.

How some bury the placenta
under a fruit tree. The child feeds
the tree that will later feed her.
None of the nutrients wasted
in some biohazard grade plastic,
turned to toxic goop, autoclaved,
incinerated with all
the other hazardous pieces
of flesh.

I did not ask for my daughter's
placenta, its cord drained of blood,
stem cells cryogenically
frozen by someone in latex-free
gloves, a bouffant cap, safety
glasses; waiting on a cure.
I did not ask for fear the tree
might die. I did not plant a tree
at all.

Before Bed

He asks me, mama? will the world
end? I say, yes. He asks, is it
Frankenstein savings light? I say,
yes, it's daylight savings time. He
asks, is Santa real? or is it just
you waking up early before us
and putting all the presents under
the tree and filling up the stockings
and eating all the cookies and
chocolate milk? I say, yes. Santa
is real. Yes. As I turn out the lamp
and the night light flickers safety,
I worry my answers whispered
into my son's loose curls. Because
these are the questions that matter.

When his hands are large and smooth
back his hair cut into a style
of his own choosing, when he rests
his head on a pillowcase not
patterned in a kaleidoscope
of dinosaurs, will my replies
have been enough? When I ask,
son? Did I say the right things?
Will he say, yes, mama. Yes.

Pride and Punishment

“I won’t sting you,” said Scorpion,
barb tucked neatly away. Frog believed,
allowed Scorpion to board his viscous
back, hopped into the indifferent creek.

If I believe my children’s eyes
more beautiful than any god’s,
their lips more sculptured, their burgeoning brains
more agile, should I expect the arrow?

Every day, the world smacks its lips,
wipes off fat grease and blood with the back
of its hand, fresh from a kill, awaits the next,
splintered venomous fangs dripping.

The shaft, the vanes quaver at my chest,
again, just before my nature calls the flood.

Bare Cupboards

Something about a bottom cupboard
demands that children contort their wily
bodies to enter that dark space. Pots and pans
riot on the floor outside as little ghost
feet disappear into the wood. They sit,
legs crossed, and pull the door shut behind them.

A thrill of fear trips down the mother's spine,
and she shivers, a hollow beat, until
the door creaks, fuzzy heads appear, and eyes
dilate over enraptured smiles tinged
with terror like a spot of blood on a yolk.
She dries her hands on a cotton towel,

and resists the urge to crush her babies
to her, nail the bare cupboards shut.

In Praise of my Daughter

I watch her at the edge of the water,
small baby body bending, crouching
for sand-crabs. She washes the surf
like finger-paints, broad movements, calling
“Come! Come! Mommy, catch one! Come!”
I unfold, solid footsteps down the grain,
crouch without the pang of vanity
because she is there. My daughter erases
too-wide hips, pregnancy fat grown
comfortable, sand marring the smooth line
of thigh, in favor of this search.

Bubbles rise and we chase, scooping holes
in sand like uncooked rice. Concavities
fill, but we pull fistfuls, mortar our fingers,
giggle. On her open hand the ghost
scurries. Digging, it throws back grain
after grain, falls through the meniscus,
erases itself from the beach.

My heart constricts watching her crouching
lurch, sign to sign. The sun lights auburn
in her hair, soft olive line of her cheek.
What Botticelli wouldn't give
everything to paint this risen Venus?