

POETRY IS THE ONLY MOTHER

POETRY IS THE ONLY REAL MOTHER

After Diane Seuss

archangel, bitch, disaster mountain, manna, bowl of mushroom barley soup
at the Blue Bay Diner, Grandma Betty's potato kugel, how I was content, pearls of grain paired
with firm, shiny mushrooms in broth flecked with flank meat, potato pie like poetry,
the only gold, or was it, my belly button pining for its lost umbilical cord as my fingers waggled,
my ring finger floating solo on a trip around my bedroom, fingering myself in the dark, finger
foods on a tray—*Ritz* crackers layered with *Cheese Whiz*. How could it be that I was a whiz
at what is holy? I rode my bike down the hill without feet, handlebars directing me home
to the bottomless hole. I talked to God & told him I didn't believe in Him. I stared at the T.V.
& thought, *This is more real than my life & this is where I want to be*. I wanted to be loved
like Ma & Pa loved Laura on *Little House on the Prairie* & shack up with Chrissy, Jack,
& Janet on *Three's Company*, floating down the Long Beach boardwalk like a silly-billy angel,
melting in the California sun. I remember myself before I talked to God, in love with my
grandma's touch & my mother's clutch—at least we were together, though what did we
have in common? Nothing much. I blew dandelion seeds through the forest, demanded that
lion's tooth be reclassified as flower. *Not weed*, I told the blackberry king behind the parking
garage. I watched seeds disappear into the sky like tiny, furred balloons. My stuffed animals
talked to me more than God, their fur matted like the terry cloth towel my mother wrapped
my hair in after a bath, my plaits sopping dark drips until she blowdried me, freed me from
the burden of water so all my skin could be smooth—underarms, ears, forehead, vulva. I made
myself come along the side of the tub. I came on the corner of the floral bedspread watching
Mr. Rogers Neighborhood as my mother popped frozen dinners in the oven, turkey thighs with
carrots, peas, & whipped potatoes with a side of crusty custard. Did I know that a simile was
coming on, did I feel it slip out from between my legs & squeal? Does language replace lack,
does it pay you back if you give it every ounce of feeling that you buried & now want back?

WE BOTH HAVE A PERSISTENT ACHE TOWARD GLADNESS

I'm done with online dating, sick to tears
of preening & half-hearted game-playing,

& I don't expect to find a mate in
the foreseeable future. But I can't stop thinking

about the Danish movie *Another Round*
& my obsession with Mads Mikkelsen's blunt-cut

sandy mane, the way it scallops over the left side
of his tanned forehead like the fabric of a wave,

breaking again & again over my lap
as he plunges his head into the trapezoid

under my jeans, his blonde-gray stubble
scraping my wrists as they graze his cheeks.

How I want to dive into the air around his collarbones
& pull him underwater in a nearby lake or stream,

bathing in the shimmer of wet miracles
as my pelvis tilts towards sunburnt sky.

I never want to stop gazing at his cheekbones
& Baryshnikov body, lithe & strong

despite the advances of middle age—
in fact, even sexier *because* he's middle aged.

My cellulite jiggles when I walk, breasts
more pendulous than firm, but Mads awakens

the drive inside that still sings of carnal magic.
Even his beautiful body must decay,

but I persist in my ruminations. I don't know
how many more years my body will captivate

the male gaze, but I am transfixed by the last scene,
when my main squeeze is carouseling by the harbor

as students & colleagues celebrate, egging him on.
It's worth watching the scene over & over,

just to see him leap over a bench like he's in *West Side Story*,
contorting his torso, elevating elbows & knees

to the endless sun, at last gulping down
a bottle of champagne before he plunges into water.

In my version of the scene, I am his eternal student
& my bed is on fire. We are dressing & undressing,

our bodies oblivious to aging cells. I am part
of the dance, our teeth rattling, notes

of the background music rising like burnt paper
over sailboats & tugs. Our breath,

a smoking furnace. The smallness of our confusion
in a sumptuous world. The wind ablaze.

THEY WILL NEVER BE AS LIGHT AS THEY ARE NOW,
ON THIS SUNDAY AFTERNOON

My friend's three children sit on a velvet green couch
posing for a photo, her sons' smiles tooth-gapped,
widening holes that could be filled

with clouds of cotton candy. Their little sister's mouth
is as tranquil as a robin on a branch. She sits cross-legged
between them, her brothers' long limbs leaning

into her as she exhales sideways, a tender pulsing stone.
Her amber hair falls just below her ears
& in her lap an iPad blinks with a blue

that lulls you to sleep while you think you're still awake.
At first it looks like she's playing piano but she isn't
playing anything, the screen a block of unlit ink.

Because I, too, have three children, I can read the writing on the wall.
I predict that in five years the boys will abandon
their sister for football, *Fortnite*, & *YouTube*,

& when she turns eleven, she'll bring her phone
into her closet, construct a fort of pillows & blankets
emblazoned with smiley cupcakes

& worship *TikTok*, imitating dancers swiveling their hips,
confounded why her brothers could care less
when she asks them to watch her moves.

On Snapchat she'll become rabbit, Bassett hound,
angel with halo of shimmering gold coins.
When she & her brothers fight,

she'll punch their stomachs before they pin her
to the rug. She'll still love them,
even though they'll only see each other at dinner

or cross paths in the hall, a rushing breeze.
Eventually they'll forget about the song of trees
& the ephemerality of spit & fat & bone.

A MATRILINEAL HISTORY OF POSSESSION

1/ This is how Grandma Betty tells the story:
Over two thousand years ago
the world was divided
into heavy & light & in the gap
souls of loved ones wandered
because they missed their beloveds
couldn't get into paradise
so became dybbuks maligned as evil spirits
entering female hosts
who spoke in voices unlike their own

2/ Over time the hosts' voices
sounded more like the dybbuks who possessed them
& the women learned
how to spontaneously invite dybbuks
into their *own* bodies
This kind of possession was the most powerful— *sod ha'ibbur*,
Hebrew for *mystery impregnation*

The night my grandma's friend Estelle turned 18,
she found a gauzy garment
slung over a chair in the light of a full moon—
slipped it on & suddenly she was crawling
with low beams of light
at the bottom of the sea
becoming water, her body blue-green
dissolving so she couldn't breathe
almost choking
then out of nowhere a spark illuminated her heart
her spirit glowed like an x-ray
& she broke the water's surface
returning to the world to do & say
what she'd always been forbidden—
get a job, pursue the college degree, say no
to arranged marriage
My grandma was not bold enough to invite a dybbuk
but Estelle was her guiding star
& she admired her deeply from afar

3/ When I turn 18 my grandma implores me:
teach yourself to get out of the curve of the mirror
make every story your own
& the part of you that never speaks will speak

& you will be seen & believed
Invite a dybbuk to inhabit you—
because of your struggles not in spite of them—
a dybbuk who turns the wheel of the Muse
into song, memory, & desire—burning a holy wind
that embodies the charm of the unseen,
potent as a red ribbon in a baby's mouth.

I ignore the dybbuk for years then return
to its electric blue tongue prodding me
to make meaning follow my own voice
weave words that sing

4/ Before my daughters turn 18, I will tell them
whatever they do not understand has intrinsic meaning
that when they taste what is holy they can trust water
trust vine trust tailfeather & the remains
Always save the ashes after they cool
This is not starvation this is revisionist magic, lace
on the backs of my hands & their great-grandmother's fingertips,
grasping white birds that ink their faces
Release begins with capture intent is everything—
now the dybbuk is metaphorical
& they can possess their own magic
I don't ask what will happen when they become afraid
Instead I ask:
What are you made of? What are you brave of?

OLDER DAUGHTER AS PERSEPHONE

I. HOW PERSEPHONE LEAVES

Persephone lives underground in the tunnel of shops under Rockefeller Center. She belongs to Hades, but Hades is also her father.

Persephone says she loves both parents & cannot choose to live with one over the other. But Hades says you must live with me because you know who loves you more.

Hades says Persephone's lips are like chocolate & that she is his gorgeous sugarplum, his one true love.

Persephone tells Demeter: *I just want to spend more time with my father; what's wrong with that?* First it's once a week, then half a week, then every week, then a spray of gold dust on the windowpane.

As Persephone picks narcissus flowers by the plaza, Hades absconds with her in his black Honda CR-V. There is no struggle. He plasters white copy paper all over his vehicle with her name & *I love you's* written in red permanent marker.

The gap in the earth closes after them. Demeter hardly sees Persephone, maybe an occasional weekend, on Christmas, or her birthday.

II. HADES' MAGIC

Hades' alter ego is Hector, who sings in a mariachi band called *Quien Me Gusta La Mejor*. His microphone is the wrinkled plum of midnight.

Hades wanted to be a priest, but because he loved women too much, he fled the seminary.

Hades enlists Persephone to cook him *enchiladas de carne*, *horchata*, & eggs over easy.

Hades teaches Persephone how to clean toilets & make windows sparkle like dragonfly wings.

Hades confides in Persephone that his second wife was only good for the sex.

Hades' second wife becomes a bird, lives in a treehouse in Texas, & visits him on weekends.

III. THE SEPARATION OF DEMETER & PERSEPHONE

When Persephone was in Pre-K, she made drawings for Demeter & wrote *I love you so much* fifty consecutive times. Sometimes she scrawled so many *sos*, they climbed off the page.

Now when Persephone texts Demeter, she writes that she loves her because she is her biological parent, but she is not part of her identity. When Persephone gets angry, she tells Demeter she is a toxic parent & that she has a special relationship with Hades now, that he's made her the person she is today.

In Family Court, when Persephone is asked where she would like to live, she answers she wants to live with Hades. The judges & attorneys say it's not such a bad thing if Persephone pledges her loyalty to Hades & becomes Queen of the Dead.

Sometimes Persephone misses her mother & siblings. Hades says she can visit them but before he allows her to leave, he layers pomegranate seeds over vanilla ice cream, presenting the dessert in a scalloped dish with a purple orchid on top.

Demeter visits Zeus & Hera, anguished & desperate. She threatens to speed up global warming, lay waste to the crops of North America.

Zeus & Hera resolve the matter by ruling that Persephone can spend more time with Demeter in the warmer months, when roses & lilac quiver on their stems, when the sun burns the meadow grasses where meadowlarks roam.

The rest of the year she will remain under Hades' spell.

IV. DEMETER'S FORGOTTEN DAUGHTER

Not many know about Demeter's other daughter Selena, whose name means moon.

How many moons has Selena not seen Persephone? She yearns to inhale her perfume, emulate her by taking selfies, wearing crop tops & short shorts from *Aeropostale*.

Persephone constantly calls & video chats with Selena. She tells her that she cannot live without her & that she is her queen, her love, her cream puff. Persephone & Hades shower her with wet kisses, extravagant gifts, & sometimes speak disparagingly of Demeter.

One day Selena becomes a young woman & tells Demeter: *I want to live with Persephone & Hades. Mother, you'll never compete with the king & queen of the underworld.*

Demeter shrieks, douses her breasts with salt. Demeter wants sleep to dampen the pain Hades has caused, the sensation of ripping off her ears & casting them into the sea.

Demeter's tears water sheafs of wheat & barley that she cradles in her arms. She lays them down on the ground next to her basket, which brims with bright orange & magenta poppies. She inhales their fragrance until sunrise casts light over the fallow fields.