

2022

And He Takes and He Takes and He Takes

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Recommended Citation

Ummel, Nikki (2022) "And He Takes and He Takes and He Takes," *Ellipsis*: Vol. 47, Article 13.

DOI: 10.46428/ejail.47.13

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/ellipsis/vol47/iss1/13>

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2022 Vassar Miller Poetry Award
Honorable Mention

And He Takes and He Takes and He Takes
by Nikki Ummel

Tessa marks time with her daughter's body:

bones grow in cadence to the
hourglass slip of sand grains wind carried,
they lodge in cuticles,
swirl the tub as she rinses suds from her daughter's skin
after an overcast beach day.

Elah: the valley where David slayed Goliath. עמק האלה *Emek HaElah*
named for overcoming, for the slaughter of giants. Elah's hair tickles
kneecaps,
swishes like a skirt.

Tessa braids her hair thick every morning, lays hands
on every inch of coarse curl,
ropes the braid around her daughter's waist,
tethering her to her five-year-old body
as old as Tessa's father is dead.

Elah grew strong
as he withered & scabbed
on a worn futon cushion.

Tessa prays for the strength
to raise her אֶבֶן *eben* stone of help
take aim at her גִּלְיָת *Golyath*.

She bore her daughter in mourning, in a black maternity dress,
finger-painted Elah with afterbirth,

forced her to bear witness as גִּלְיָת *Golyath*
the revealer, the giant-who-uncovers

lingered in the corner.

Grief stitched itself into pituitary, coaxed forth a manic rush of HGH.

Elah is large for her age. The x-ray
reveals a skeleton two years too old—

עצם *etsem* bones-substance-self
too big for her body.

She is five. Her skeleton is seven, a cage fit to burst.
Her ribs bars of iron, her bones of bronze.

Tessa stuffs her mouth with fig leaves until she chokes on:

תִּפְאָרֶתְךָ *tipharah* Glory Be

Glory Be Glory Be