

12-15-2007

Blood into Milk: Poems

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Blood into Milk:

Poems

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theater and Communication Arts
Creative Writing, Poetry

by

Ginny Kaczmarek

B.A. San Francisco State University, 1998

December, 2007

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*For Ian
and for Emery*

Acknowledgments

I'd like to express my deepest gratitude to all of my professors at the University of New Orleans, particularly those of my thesis committee: Kay Murphy, for providing freedom and support for those of us exploring formal verse for the first time; Niyi Osundare, for optimism in the face of disaster—you are an inspiration in your life and work; and John Gery, for “interfering” with my work, pushing me to dig deeper, write better—and for calling me a poet before I could call myself one.

To my classmates in my Creative Writing Workshops, a talented and generous community of writers: I hope to return the favor many times over. Leeandra Nolting, thanks for sharing gossip, wine, and your unerring ear for meter, rhyme, and irony.

I want to thank my family and friends for being my champions: my mom, Flory Crane, for bragging about me to everyone in Wisconsin; my in-laws, Anne and Mike Johnson, for offering free, loving child care and enthusiasm for my writing; Aimée and Scottie, for shelter from the storm; Mary, for always believing; Emery, for replacing my free time with joy; and Ian, without whose patience, support, and love none of this would be possible.

And thanks to everyone who said “Cool!” instead of “Huh?” when I told them what I do.

Grateful acknowledgments are also made to the editors and publishers of the following publications, where some of these poems first appeared, sometimes in very different form:

Measure: An Annual Review of Formal Poetry published “To My Daughter”

Sailing in the Mist of Time: Award-Winning Poems printed “Embarcadero”

The Maple Leaf Rag III published “First Word”

Ellipsis 2005 first published “Man Still Missing” and “Waiting on Thom Gunn”

The River 2006: Anthology of the Natchez Poetry Contest printed “Aftermath” (now “Empty Houses II”) and reprinted “Waiting on Thom Gunn”

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Toward a Unification of Parenthood and Poet-hood

While I contemplated the impermanence of the flesh in W.B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," my toddler crawled onto my lap, clawed at my shirt, and cried, "Nurse! Nurse!" Flesh may be impermanent, but its needs are immediate; eternal artifice means nothing to a hungry one-year-old. The experience inspired me to write a parody, "Sailing Back to Singledom," in which I travel to a mythical prechild state of uninterrupted time to read, write, and even use the toilet alone. The irony is that without my child, I would not have written that poem; I did not write as often (or as well) when I was single as I do now that I am a mother. To write my way out of the conflict between motherhood and poetry, I have developed an aesthetic map, a set of beliefs and values around which I write, that focuses on the power of subversive imagination, the responsibility of the poet, the vulnerability and courage of motherhood, and my desire to reclaim traditional formal techniques. These key tenets help me to strive toward the future that Adrienne Rich imagined in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," wherein "...the energy of creation and the energy of relation can be united."

When children are small, especially, the physical demands of child-rearing, to say nothing of the emotional and mental strain, can prevent a mother from picking up a pen (it's hard to write and nurse simultaneously: I've tried). Historically, many well-known female writers either remained single or childless—Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen, Marianne Moore—or could afford servants to care for children—Katherine Philips, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. As women worked for their rights, gaining control over their bodies and the minutiae of their lives, more disparate mothers' voices entered the canon, but old conflicts remained. Mother-poets still navigate between societal expectations of them as selfless caretakers and what Rich calls "the

myth of the masculine artist and thinker”: that to write, one must become “a devouring ego.” Rich’s argument is that traditional motherhood, as she experienced it in the 1950s, requires a conservatism in thought, which is in opposition to “the subversive function of the imagination” necessary to write poetry. In order to write a poem, according to Rich, the imagination must be completely free of responsibilities, loyalties, even realities: “[N]othing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming.” Re-naming is necessary because neither narrowly defined role—traditional mother nor devouring poet—is conducive to a life in which motherhood and artistry can coexist.

Like many other women, motherhood has given me a new identity, but even as I redefine myself, I must examine that definition, to look at the category of “mother” from other perspectives, including some that I find unpleasant or unflattering. I must also examine the category “poet” to escape the notion that a “devouring ego,” incompatible with healthy relationships, is necessary to create art. Each woman, including me, must resolve her struggle between who she is as a mother and who she is as a poet; the importance of imaginative freedom can be the difference between writing and not writing. It is easy to set my poetry aside in favor of my child’s needs, but doing so is like cutting off a piece of myself; finding a balance is necessary to avoid sacrificing my child, my poetry, or myself.

Ignoring this part of me also limits how I contribute to my community. As a mother, I am responsible for raising the next generation, and as a poet, I am responsible for helping to construct a vision of the future in which my child will live. As my determination to create a better world for my son intensifies, so does my relationship to my own writing. Poetic imagination is vital to the health of a society in that it allows us to conceive of alternate realities in order to create them. For example, because trailblazing poets, such as Barrett Browning and

Rich, imagined—and wrote—of a future where women could write, work, and raise families simultaneously, women today have more options. Audre Lorde, another mother-poet, describes how poetry creates futures from dreams in her essay, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

Lorde’s argument for the vitality of poetry in women’s lives meshes with my renewed responsibility, determination, and focus that has stemmed from motherhood. My life’s “rock experiences”—raising my son, reflecting on affairs of the heart, or responding to current events—are filled with both mundane and magical moments, hopes and fears. By translating these into poetry and sharing the result with others, I hope to “give name to the nameless” as I strive toward a unification of parenthood and poet-hood.

The difficulty, of course, is finding the time, space, and energy to write, even with this renewed sense of responsibility. In theory, my roles as mother and poet are equally important; in daily practice, writing usually takes a back seat to my son’s needs. My reality as a full-time mother consists of scraps of time, scraps of scribblings. Rich’s description of writing her poem, “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” as a young mother sounds all too familiar:

The poem was jotted in fragments during children’s naps, brief hours in a library, or at 3:00 A.M. after rising with a wakeful child. I despaired of doing any continuous work at this time. Yet I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be ‘universal,’ which meant, of course, nonfemale.

Her despair about doing any continuous work is mine as well, despite sharing child-rearing responsibilities with my husband and paying for childcare. But I also share Rich’s hope of

discovering a new imperative quality about my writing. For Rich, her burgeoning feminism first appeared to her through her “fragments and scraps.” For me, my priorities have shifted; where my greatest fear was once a misplaced metaphor, now I compare the potential consequences of bad writing to what truly frightens me: harm coming to my child. This responsibility toward his survival has spilled over into my writing, where I now explore emotions and forms I wouldn’t have dared to before. The redirection of focus toward my child has given me a newfound freedom of imagination, a sense of responsibility, and the courage to explore each. I like to imagine that my new consciousness might someday translate into a broader social theory (motherism?) benefiting mothers who struggle to reconcile their lives with their work; my work in this regard has just begun.

The vulnerability I feel as a parent has become both a topic in and an impetus for my writing. For example, in my poem “Floodwater,” I attempt to describe how I felt when I gave birth as a refugee, five days after the floods resulting from Hurricane Katrina nearly destroyed our city of New Orleans. In the poem, the speaker wonders how to protect her child from forces beyond her control, asking, “I need to keep him safe, but how / when even the levees fall apart?” Of course, vulnerability is not the sole domain of parenthood; I extend those feelings of fragility to other poems. My poems of desire, such as “The Neighbor,” also necessitate a certain vulnerability in the speaker’s voice. When the speaker of that poem asks, “Does she /devour everything around her?” her question conveys both obsessive urgency and poignancy. As she subtly threatens to devour her competitor, she is being devoured by her own unrequited love; her vulnerability has turned her into a monster. Even my poems that employ humor or irony, such as “Ode to My Green-Eyed Monster,” retain a certain gravitas with added vulnerability. In that poem, the question that personified Jealousy asks the speaker, “Weren’t you enough?” suggests

the potential of loss as a thematic undercurrent to an otherwise humorous (I hope) poem. As I attempt a true re-vision of my poems, including those I wrote before I became a mother, I am able to clarify my earlier perspectives, moving closer to my original intentions by clearing out hesitation and fear. Motherhood, with its strengths and responsibilities, courage and vulnerability, has become a filter through which I experience the world.

Although my theory of poetics has been greatly influenced by the criticism of feminist mother-poets such as Rich and Lorde, formalist poets, such as Yeats and Thom Gunn, have had more impact on my poetry itself. I first tried writing in formal verse with a slightly unconventional sonnet, “Waiting on Thom Gunn,” about a waitress inspired to write by the proximity of a Famous Poet in her daily grind. (In fact, in San Francisco, Gunn was a regular in the café where I worked.) Because of the constraints of meter and rhyme, I discovered new depths for my subject matter, and I was hooked. In a 1989 interview, Gunn explained how formal constraints can open up poetic exploration: “...in looking for a rhyme, or in trying to get a meter right, you are often having to go deeper into your subject so that you discover things about it, and about your reaction to it, that you didn’t know before.” The courage and deft skill of Gunn’s poetry—his “punk formalism,” to borrow a phrase from my professor, John Gery—taught me that one could write in classic forms but still sound modern and fresh. For example, Gunn’s “The Victim” details the tragedy of the over-publicized death of punk rocker Nancy Spungen by Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols in rhymed triplets of iambic tetrameter. Through form and language, Gunn emphasizes the girl’s humanity, despite her fierce costume and squalid death.

Since my first exposure to formal poetry, I have enjoyed and studied female formalists, too, from Barrett Browning’s blank verse, to Gwendolyn Brooks’s sonnets, to Annie Finch’s

metrical experiments. From them, as well as from Yeats and Gunn, I have learned that when I am writing something difficult or painful, such as exploring vulnerability, formal techniques better shape more complex ideas and emotions than raw language alone can sufficiently convey. Rich has criticized this aspect of received forms, referring to her own early formal poetry as using “asbestos gloves” to handle incendiary materials—and she removed her gloves. Her poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” reflects in its form the “fragments and scraps” of time in which it was written, as do many of her later works. Although I also write in fragments of time because of the demands of motherhood, I find that a formal template provides a context and scaffolding for my words. Poetry, like motherhood, is often the art of creating order from chaos, and I believe that formal regularity often makes that transition possible. As in sewing or knitting, the “pattern” of a particular poem acts as a placeholder for me, allowing re-entry when I need to step away from the poem, as well as a recognizable design for the finished product.

Many contemporary poets argue that received forms carry heavy cultural baggage: misogyny, racism, homophobia, classism, imperialism. However, complete rejection of traditional verse is not the only response available. Marilyn Nelson, in her essay “Owning the Masters,” writes:

If reading well means reading politically, conscious of the social considerations which inform any text, those of us who come from traditions of oppression find ourselves estranged from canonical texts, and must fight—against them and our arguments with them—to own them.

Poets can be conscious of the social and political considerations of texts, without throwing them out altogether. Instead, Nelson emphasizes our responsibility to poetry’s evolution: “As we own the masters and learn to use more and more levels of this language we love, for whose continued evolution we share responsibility, the signifiers become ours.” In this way, poets can reclaim

tradition, by creating dialogue with those poets who have preceded us, whether we argue or agree with them, and reshaping the debate. As mothers, and as poets, we hold the future in our arms; our parental and poetic writing and activism turn our struggle, as Lorde says, “into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.”

In my role as poet, as well as in my role as mother, I am part of a continuum, and my responsibility is to help shape the future using tools from the past. In my own writing, I try to link, as Annie Finch says in her introduction to *A Formal Feeling Comes*, “...the strengths of the old with the strengths of the new: not a nostalgic return to the old forms but an unprecedented relationship with their infinite challenges.” This is the freedom and challenge of poetry: to revise my worldview continually in an attempt to uncover a notion or form I might not have considered otherwise. Because writers such as Rich and Lorde dared to imagine different ways of combining motherhood with artistry, mothers of my generation have more alternatives than women of previous generations. But the work is not over. I still feel the conflict between my responsibilities as a mother and as a poet, especially in terms of time, space, and energy. In my writing, and in my life, I endeavor to continually redefine and rename my experience, and in so doing, to balance parenthood with poet-hood. Through my poetry, I hope to realize the dream of mother-poets who have preceded me: finally to unite the energy of creation with the energy of relation.

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*But the time came when it became really hard
to put down on paper what I wanted to express from the heart.
It is those poems, the ones that took sweat and laborious joy to create,
which remain.*

—Gregory Corso, “Some of My Beginning...and What I Feel Right Now”

The Muse

A sudden blow: another girl attacked
by literary monsters. These vampires
perform belletristic rape; they extract
blood, inspiration, salve for their desires
from her. But even as teeth pierce her skin
and rough hands probe her thighs, she feels a song
rumble through her. Though no heart beats within,
their blood hisses sweet music: *You belong*—
and she remembers that she asked for this.
Voice covered in ice, she wanted something
to pull her from that dry wordless abyss,
to drench her throat, to teach her how to sing.
She seizes a demon, versed in her needs,
tells him, *I knew you'd come*, then turns and feeds.

I. Salve for Desire

The Neighbor

1.
Footsteps across wood floors,
dishes clinking in a sink—
I hear you moving inside.
Only a narrow fence
covered in passion flowers
and these thin panes of glass
separate us, your
silhouette gliding casually
into the next room—your bedroom?—
the only window with curtains.

2.
A door slams, a lock clicks,
truck tires crunch gravel.
It's dark; are you meeting a friend?
Someone from work, maybe? A girl
with soft white skin to take
to bed, heavy with your scent—
then Sunday papers and orange juice
forever. Is she terribly clever and sad?
Is she violent in her love? Does she
devour everything around her?

3.
Your truck returns, your windows
empty now. My terrifying light
consumes the darkness like fire
in the midst of this desolate winter.
Your bedroom curtains tremble:
a breath, a breeze, a lover's sigh?
Maybe, just past the glass,
you're alone there, breathing
softly, hair damp across your forehead,
gazing through veiled windows, so close
I can almost taste you dreaming.

Shanti's Gun

The others leave. I linger.
He says, *Stay*, fingers hot
on my arm.

He whispers, *Look:*

black plastic handle tucked
tight into jeans

(his mom's kitchen
fake fruit, sunlight
glaring off linoleum)

Touch it.

I reach
down, fingertips stroking
tentatively.

He pulls it out half-
way,
fierce cold metal

against skin (white

tiles, purple stain
on the tablecloth,
jelly?)

Don't tell, he breathes,
sweat sharp
and fresh. He lets
go and I

turn,
mouth full
of ashes,
dusty plastic
apples
on the counter

same as this morning
only much

farther away.

Ballad of Glitter Doll

Glitter Doll etched in wet cement,
i dotted with a star—
now just her name is permanent,
only a sidewalk scar.

In her black mirrored sunglasses,
I saw my own reflection
flicker uncertainly in flashes
turning in my direction.

Five stars she'd drawn in her little black book
next to my name. We'd dance
together, arms entwined, then look,
smiling, at each man's glance.

My blouse reminded her of whores
she knew in Hollywood:
Fuzzy, who fucked dogs on all fours,
one-breasted Lefty who'd

do it all night "for shits and giggles."
Dazzled, I dressed the part
to keep her watching: flash and jiggle
like light off a tinfoil star.

Dancing slow in her room, we burned
incense sweet as Nick Cave's moan,
yet even next to her, I yearned
for more. I let her go—

the girl who blazed across my sky—
so I would not combust.
She left, inscribing her goodbye
in trails of glitter dust.

When You Return

When you return, be vicious.
Tell me you hate my hair, my lips,
the way my jeans hug my hips—
no, don't look at my hips. Tell me
you didn't think of me at all
except to laugh at how I acted
that last time.

When you return, be ugly.
Show up wearing black socks
with sandals. Belch beer.
Pick lunch from your teeth.
But don't smell like mown grass,
sawdust like down on your tanned arms.
Don't look me over, slowly, up
and down, smiling, the way you used to.

When you return, be ready:
I'll ignore your face, stuff that fire
back into the volcano. I won't
get into your big red truck. I won't
breathe your black leather shoulders
or taste cigarettes on your mouth
or open my legs like a road
for your return. Don't tease me,
just say my name, say my name, say my name.

Your Eyes

As if I were too bright,
you close your eyes
in the afternoon light,
your body joined with mine.

Open them, let me in.
A blaze of green desire
illuminates my skin—
my wings scorch in your fire.

Between Land and Sea

Down we go, careful footing, into the cleft of a cliff
where the ocean laps seductively at the shore.
In little dug-out coves, seaweed rots
in fly-smothered clumps; dead jellyfish sprawl
underfoot. We tiptoe past to where clear bubbles pop
and starfish as big as my hand cling to the land's edge.

We strip off our jackets. Against warm rock,
skin wants to be touched. Your hands move
over my breasts, my belly, under my jeans;
waves in my ears, I plunge my hands downward
and you sigh; your neck tastes like ocean.
We feel our way toward the center and answer the gulls
crying we've found something, someplace,
between the waves and the rocky coast, where we belong.

Cliffs at our backs, we gaze at ships gliding past,
the ocean's ripples trembling around our feet.

II. Literary Monsters

Waiting on Thom Gunn

While I served coffee to the morning crowd
of dead-eyed workers in their button-downs
and the sky paled to San Francisco gray,
the man in black strode through the dim café.
His leather pants, rough motorcycle boots
and blurred tattoo stood out among the suits,
but his genteel manner and poet's eyes
charmed me. Perhaps he saw through my disguise,
plumbing the dreams of a waitress who waits
for more than scraps congealing on cold plates.
Rushing past, I lacked the time and patience
to memorize our brief conversations—
still, his eyes, sparkling in the early light
awakened my desire to write.

Laundry Villanelle

Innocently, the laundered whites
glow, two clean shirts pinned to a pole
dancing like angels in moonlight.

The shirts' hollow arms, ghosts in the night,
flail joyfully, despite the cold—
the innocence of laundered whites.

Where are their wearers? Late at night
we all search for someone to hold,
to dance with angels in moonlight.

Worthless pursuit, to clasp one tight;
arms aren't enough in which to fold
pure innocence. Those laundered whites

hang empty; still, they find delight
in every breeze. Who needs a soul
to dance with angels in moonlight?

Forget lovers who prowl the night,
although their absence leaves a hole.
Be innocent, like laundered whites,
dancing, an angel in moonlight.

Anecdote of the Green Toilet

after Stevens

I saw a toilet on Prytania Street
And green it was, near the gutter.
It made the cozy shotgun houses
Surround that gutter.

The houses shrank from it,
their shuttered secrets now exposed.
The toilet, green in that Uptown scene,
was porcelain, not Port-O-Let.

It took dominion of that set.
The toilet was bare and wet.
Uncovered, unlocked, unscrubbed, it sat
Like nothing else on Prytania Street.

For an '89 Volvo

You're square, not sleek nor sophisticated,
an awkward mule parked among the classy.
Your heavy steel frame, downright antiquated,
accentuates your boxy workhorse chassis.
Even your coat, once glossy white, has weathered
to gray, flecked with rust spots. Yet when I gaze
across the lot, you're there, patiently tethered:
stability reassures me these days,
and you endure. Climbing behind your wheel,
safe in your saddle, I'm ready to roam.
You snort sweetly at the touch of my heel;
you don't gallop, but you know the way home:
past asphalt rivers, through concrete canyons,
toward one more sundown, my rusty companion.

Ode to My Green-Eyed Monster

O Jealousy, when first we met
I hated how your voice eclipsed
rational thought and cold regret.
Each night you whispered, *Don't resist.*
Weren't you enough? Never forget
their bodies heaving, your clenched fist.
Your faithfulness I can't eschew;
she might have him, but I have you.

Country-Western Triolet

Never drank whiskey, never huffed glue
until it came time to forget
your leavin' me, darlin', lonesome and blue—
then I drank whiskey and I huffed glue.
When I tried cocaine, ate pills of each hue,
they just got me deeper in debt.
Now I drink whiskey and I huff glue
'til I remember to forget.

The Threshold Machine

Come one, come all, it's like nothing you've seen:
our new invention, the Threshold Machine.
Have you ever felt alone in your skin,
unable to describe the pain you're in?
Now you don't need to, there's nothing to say.
The Threshold Machine wipes those words away.
We plug you in and start turning the wheel;
it measures technically just how you feel.
Then hook up your friends, your family, or lover
and watch the screens blink, the needles hover—
they'll feel what you felt, instant compassion
through our commiseration contraption.
So wait no more, don't try to explain.
We know you suffer; make them feel your pain.
No more crying alone. Those days are past.
They'll hurt as you hurt, while offer lasts.

Sailing Back to Singledom

This is no place for mothers. The child-free
in each other's arms have sex on the floor
—a spotless floor!—without wee spies to see
or hear their uninhibited amour,
or pound on doors when they're trying to pee,
or eat their chocolate stash, then ask for more.
Wrapped in the comfort of their solitude,
they postpone an encroaching decrepitude.

But mothers' personalities grow numb
like half-melted Popsicles, the same way
our stylish clothes and tidy homes succumb
to our children's debris. Now disarray
is singing-master of our souls; chewed gum
in carpet, monument to life's buffet.
And therefore I have sailed the seas to come
back to the holy state of Singledom.

O Solitude! O Undistracted Peace!
Although a childless marriage offers perks
(the aforementioned sex on swift caprice)
someone else's dirty laundry still lurks
behind the bathroom door. This too must cease!
I long to be a single girl who shirks
all but the bath, a cloistered tub to muse
on my desires whenever I might choose.

Once free of Mommy duty, I'll never take
a full night's sleep for granted, nor quiet time
alone to think, to read, to pee. Awake
I'll write, create—mind and jeans free of slime
from a child's endless mucus. Like Yeats, I'll make
my art, unfettered, free to hone each rhyme
unfazed by whiffs of poop. To Singledom!
This time, I'll shun that man who made me come.

III. Dry Wordless Abyss

*Oh the streets are cracked
and there's glass everywhere
and a baby stares out
with motherless eyes.*

...
*Oh where, oh where
will I be
when that trumpet sounds?*

—Daniel Lanois, “Where Will I Be”

Azaleas

Tiny explosions of fuchsia flowers
bloom, unafraid, in January.
A magical day in the sun, the rain's caress,
and the azaleas think they're safe.
Better to curb passion, to protect their petals;
frost could arrive any day.

The Embarcadero

Winter should smell like caterpillars,
leaf piles rich with decay, dry woodsmoke.
But the San Francisco breeze carries fish.
The sidewalks sparkle with morning frost:
not ice, but fish bits hosed toward the gutters.

Even in January, the palm trees reach up
for depths of cobalt. I once thought such skies
were a blue trick of the camera, a California myth.
But here, lemons dangle from trees like ornaments,
and flowers bloom among concrete blocks.

I don't have names for these flowers;
purple, blue, pink clumps thriving among steel
and glass. The winding asphalt river shimmers
with nameless petals—iridescent fish scales
returning, eventually, to the sea.

The River Beckons

Come to the river, my darling, and slide
into my depths like the sun: as it glides,
glittering, over my surface, gold rays
dying in twilight's approach, it cedes the days
to me. Slip off your cumbersome dress.
Slippery seagrasses softly caress
your languishing thighs; minnows nibble your breast,
tasting your sorrow. Surrender; find rest
lowering into my silky embrace.

Drink in my body; I'll swiftly erase
whispering voices, including your own,
wretched with tears. Release all that you've known.
Let yourself drift; you're dissolving at last.
Look at the sky from below my green glass—
branches reach skeletal fingers toward you
but nothing
and no one
can hold you
as I do.

Man Still Missing

For my grandmother

Tuesday evening, the long day nearly gone,
she burns their dinner, waiting for her man.
Still no word. Falling into bed alone,
she listens for burglars, thinks of his gun.
Restless, she moans in sleep, dreaming of fields
awash in blood. Her eyes open to cold

morning light. Still no word. The cold
envelops her. Where has he gone?
At work, his secretary fields
her call: says yesterday her man
left work early, retrieved his gun,
said he'd be off hunting, alone.

The phone dies; left alone,
her skin turns hot, then cold.
She searches for his gun
under the bed. It's gone.
She panics. Is her man
lost, wandering the fields?

Police search fields,
paired and alone.
Day and night, men
traipse the hard cold.
Where has he gone?
Why take his gun?

Through gun-
less fields
she's gone,
heart lone-
ly, cold.
No man.

(stanza break)

Man,
gun.
Cold
fields—
alone.

Gone.

Empty Houses I

New Orleans, winter 2006

The white house on the corner has a hole
in it, helpless siding dangling over
a cavity where the front door used to be.
When streets became a lake, the scum left scars:
unbroken yellow lines along the walls,
across the windows, continuing next door, on
and on, whole city blocks inscribed by fetid water.

Street after street, rows of vacant houses
vomit chunks of walls, half-digested furniture,
clots of eradicated photographs, lost
lives putrefying in the sun. Although
behind their heaps of trash, the houses gape
expectantly, they are not hungry mouths—
nor are they homes. Undefined, they wait.

Empty Houses II

New Orleans, winter 2006

Between the bricks, ferns unfurl, resurrected
by winter rain. The sky rips open, pours
through rooftop wounds from fallen trees; infected
with rot, leaves fill the vacuum nature abhors.
Inside, plaster bares its lath; solid for years,
boards crumble under the kudzu's eager care.
Eaten by black mold, furniture disappears.

A carnal stench invades the jasmine air:
forgotten, the house's inhabitants
rest peacefully, nestled in verdure's fingers.
Malodorous slime shrouds those left alone
to fight—and lose—against the tides. The plants
take over, burying their household bones,
hushing any human trace that lingers.

IV. Blood into Milk

Floodwater

*For Emery,
born five days
after Hurricane Katrina*

As houses sank to sodden graves—
anguish flooding the Superdome—
my waters broke; far from our home
I, too, succumbed to ceaseless waves.

Born in exile, my infant son
clung to me as if we might float
over floodwater—an uncertain boat
carried back home, now almost gone.

But in my dream, I watched him drown,
floating beyond my fingertips.
Floodwater dribbled from his lips.
I reached for him. He made no sound.

I need to keep him safe, but how
when even the levees fall apart?
Floodwater still surrounds my heart;
what else might break the cradle bough?

Lullaby

*Infant dies of alcohol poisoning
from vodka in baby bottle*
News item, October 2006

The moon is a cradle tonight, tonight
the moon is a cradle tonight.
But we are not sleeping, all right, all right
nobody's sleeping, all right.

Your tiny mouth opens so wide, so wide
tiny red hole mouth so wide.
I can't stop your screaming, can't hide, can't hide
from all your screaming, can't hide.

What calms my poor baby to sleep, to sleep
what calms this damned baby to sleep?
Not song nor story nor sheep, nor sheep
not pacing nor bouncing nor sheep.

Maybe a sweet drink makes sense, makes sense
at three A.M. it makes sense.
A sip makes me less tense, less tense
maybe it will make you less tense.

Drink down your bottle, don't move, don't move,
down your whole bottle, don't move.
You haven't a thing left to prove, to prove
there's nothing left to prove.

At last you've stopped crying, my love, my love
now we're done crying, my love.
Sleep still as the cold moon above, above
still as the cold moon above.

To My Daughter

The piercing ice of winter never ends
while you're with him. Each day is starless night;
the rotted fruit of black-limbed trees portends
despair. Darkness reigns. I forbid all light.

Again it's time to bring you forth, my child,
from earth's womb, not from mine. The golden bough
I pay Charon; he knows me now, and you, beguiled,
buried in your husband's arms of snow.

I once paid more, in blood and tears, when first
I pushed you from your amniotic sea—
the first time you left me. And now we're cursed:
forced into Hell's cold embrace, you need me

to bear your light, you who outshine the day.
Come to your mother's arms; I'll lead the way.

Waiting

Possibilities hover like bubbles
that shatter at a touch.
Despite a drop of blood,
hope persists, glittering like broken glass

among the fallen acorns in the gutter.
They, too, await decay
or growth, whichever comes first.
Maybe next month I'll hold that spark of light,

glimmering, unbreakable, bloodless.

Ode on My Breasts

Encased in lace, my breasts entice.
But freed from their silky restraints, bared
to feed my hungry child, they change,
from ornamental to animal.
Intrigue becomes disgust, even as
my nestled baby sighs, *uhm uhm*,
heaven's music from human spheres.

When any child cries, my breasts weep,
bestowing bounteous ambrosia;
a mere squirt sprays a river of stars.
From heart to mouth, blood into milk,
alchemy nourishes creation.
Neither divine nor doglike—but both—
I flaunt the essence of *mamma*.

First Word

In Heav'n you'll learn to sing ere here to speak
Richard Crashaw, "To the Infant Martyrs"

Like Adam in the Garden, you fix life
with names. Each time, I give the word, you point,
the cat is *kitty*. Eagerly, you dub
the dog *kitty* too. I say, *No, dog-gy*,
correcting you, shaping new syllables
for you to populate your own Eden.

Yet fluid possibilities get lost:
not *liquid fur* nor *woof*, but *kitty, dog*.
Under the weight of words, wonder contracts.
Finger poised, you chant your incantation;
the cat acknowledges your name for it
and, arching its back, settles into place.

Ginny Kaczmarek is a mama, poet, and critic. Educated at Northwestern University, San Francisco State University, and the University of New Orleans, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in creative writing in 1998 and plans to finish a Master of Fine Arts degree in poetry in 2007. Her writing has appeared in *Measure: An Annual Review of Formal Poetry*, *The River: The Natchez Poetry Anthology*, *The Maple Leaf Rag III*, *Literary Mama*, and others. Awards for her writing include a New Orleans Literary Institute KARES grant, the Andrea Saunders Gereighty Poetry Award from the Academy of American Poets, and the Malcolm Magaw Prize for the Essay. She lives in New Orleans with her husband, son, and an extremely ornery cat.