

PROPAGANDA POEM: MAYBE FOR SOME YOUNG MAMAS

1. THE VISITING POET

(after reading the girls my old pregnancy poem
that I thought ripe and beautiful
after they made themselves clear it was ugly
after telling the girls I would as soon
go to my grave a virgin, god
forbid, as go to my grave without
ever bearing and rearing a child
I laughed
and if looks could kill I would
have been one dead duck in that
so-called “feminist” classroom)

Oh young girls in a classroom
with your smooth skins like paper not yet written on
your good American bodies, your breasts, your bellies
fed healthy on hamburgers and milkshakes, almost
like photographs in solution half-developed
I leaned and strained toward you, trying to understand
what you were becoming
as you sat so quietly under the winter light
that fell into our classroom
and I tried, as a teacher, to transmit information
that’s my job, knowledge like currency
you have to spend it

oh young mamas
no matter what your age is you
are born when you give birth
to a baby you start over

one animal

and both gently just slightly
separated from each other
swaying, swinging
like a vine, like an oriole nest

keep returning to each other
like a little tide, like a little wave
for a little while

better than sex, that bitter honey, maybe
could be the connection you've been waiting for
because no man is god, no woman is a goddess
we are all of us spoiled by that time

but a baby
 any baby
 your baby is
 the
most perfect human thing you can ever touch
translucent
and I want you to think about touching
and the pleasure of touching
and being touched by this most perfect thing
 this pear tree blossom
 this mouth these leafy hands these genitals
 like petals
 a warm scalp resting against your cheek
 fruit's warmth
 beginning—

Curtains curtains you say young girls
we want to live our lives
don't want the burden the responsibility
the disgusting mess
of children

we want our freedom and we want it now
I see you shudder truly and I wonder what

kind of lives you want so badly
to live or who has cut you with what axes
from the sense of your
flowing sap or why
are you made of sand

young girls will you walk
out of this door and spend your substance freely
or who has shown to you the greedy mirror
the lying mirror
the desert
sand—

I am telling you and you can take me for a fool there is no
good time like the good time a whole mama
has with a whole little baby and that's

where the first images
of deity came from—sister you know it's true
you know in secret how they
cut us down

because who can bear the joy that hurts nobody
the dazzling circuit of contact without dominance
that by the way might make you less vulnerable
to cancer and who knows what other diseases
of the body

because who can bear a thing that makes you happy
and rolls the world a little way

on forward
toward its destiny

because a woman is acceptable if she is
weak
acceptable if she is a victim

acceptable also if she is an angry victim (“shrew,”
“witch”)
a woman’s sorrow is acceptable
a deodorized sanitized sterilized antiperspirant
grinning efficient woman is certainly acceptable

but who can tolerate the power of a woman
close to a child, riding our tides
into the sand dunes of the public spaces.

2. POSTSCRIPT TO PROPAGANDA

That they limit your liberty, of course,
entirely. That they limit your cash. That they limit your sleep.
Your sleep is a dirty torn cloth.

That they whine until you want to murder them. That their beauty
prevents you. That their eating and excreting exactly resembles
the slime-trails of slugs. On your knees you follow, cleaning,
unstaining. That they burn themselves, lacerate themselves, bruise
themselves. That they get ill. That you sit at their bedsides
exhausted, coughing, reading dully to them, wiping their foreheads
with wet washcloths to lower the fever, your life peeling away
from you like layers of cellophane. Of course.

That you are wheels to them. That you are grease.
An iron doorway they kick open, they run out, nobody has
remembered to close it. That their demanding is a grey north wind.
That their sullenness is a damp that rots your wood, their
malice a metal that draws your blood, their disobedience the fire that
burns your sacred book, their sorrows the webbing that entraps you
like a thrashing fish. That when your child grieves, mother,
you bend and grieve. That you disentwine yourself from them, lock
the pores of your love, set them at a distance. That in this
fashion the years pass, like calendar pages flipped in a silent
movie, and you are old, you are wrinkled as tortoises.

Come on, you daughters of bitches, do you want to live forever?

3. WHAT ACTUALLY

What a lot of garbage we all shovel. What a lot of self-serving, self-pitying rhetoric we splash around in. We paint ourselves wrong. How can I, to paraphrase the poet, say what I actually mean? What, anyway, do I mean? About motherhood? It is the unanimity that offends me. The ideological lockstep, that cannot permit women, humans, simply to choose for themselves. When I was in college everyone expected to get married and have babies, and everyone thought this was her own idea, although from this distance we can see that we were programmed. Presently everyone believes motherhood is the sinister invention of patriarchy.

This week in Paris I learn that the serious intellectual women are into lesbianism, incest, armed violence and the theory of hysteria. G. gave her slide lecture on the re-emergence of the goddess image in women's art and was called a Nazi. How can I be a Nazi, she said, I'm a Jew.

A friend's daughter dies of crib death. She tries to have another, fails. Fails. Fails. She and her husband divorce, she moves to another town, in a year she is pregnant. She does not want to marry the nice young man. She does not want an abortion. She keeps her job, she has the baby, she prays. A friend crosses her fifty-year-old legs in bluejeans, swallows her vodka and says she knows that nothing but her sobbing when at last she was alone in the airport parking lot kept her children's jet from crashing in the Atlantic. A friend's green-eyed son has leukemia, he plays baseball, he collects stamps, she buys a camera and takes pictures of him in teshirt and shorts, as naked as she dares.

Born. I believe that some of us are born to be mamas, nobody can know how many or which ones. We are probably identifiable at an early age by our foolish happiness in the presence of smaller children. Some born not to be. Some in the middle. Were there maybe a few young mamas sitting in that classroom in the winter light, subdued, their codes inaudible? Were they afraid to choose? Have we not explained to the young that choice equals risk? Wanted to tell them to decode themselves, like unwrapping a package carefully, not to damage it. Wanted to tell them, mamas or not mamas, we all get damaged when put to use, we get like wornout houses, but only the life that hoards and coffins itself is already dead.

New Brunswick 1975–Paris 1979