

The Brood

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for Bill and Irene Killmer, with love

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The brood

I don't want to share anything with you,
I want to be alone late at night,
I want to drink until I'm dry,
I want to make secret journeys down the dank streets
where married men don't venture,
I want rooms of clinking crystal
and appreciative smiles,
jokes tumbling from my lips
like silvery grunions
slapping in moonlight.
I don't want to help carry groceries in from the car,
groceries I will never eat,
go for endless walks that take us nowhere,
rub your back when mine is killing me,
I want sleep forever under sparkling snows
and dream of ballgames and girlfriends
and the years of goodtimes before
this dagger snaked its way into my breast,
I am afraid of waters and doctors
and the look on your face
when you are in trouble.
I want to undo everything, erase my assent,
irradiate my sperm, run off
to a nation that is beaches only,
that welcomes heels and celebrates
desertion and whose official flower
is the beget-me-not.

And yet,
to be father
of this melon thing in you
with all its sweet red stuff, and seeds and rind,
is a grand endeavor, and I see plainly in your eyes
that this is your wish and because I am your slave by heart
I accept the full penalty, let them come, let them swarm on me
like ticks, I will bounce them and change them
and wipe them clean as if they were my own
and all the while knowing where once there was life
is now only children, and the windblown fluff
that was once my hide is all that remains
of a boy who loved
to play.

Ultrasound

First glimpse of the child sent to replace me
Is of glassine bone and milky skull.
Two hearts quicken, ages in ages yawn.

Doctors chat and diddle buttons,
Knead the image squirming on their monitors --
A handful of centimeters from ulna to shoulder,

The gauge of the brain-pan,
The auspicious twelfth rib.
There the heart, like a tulip sprouting from the chest,

The kiss-blowing machine, the plunge
Of its pumping, the determined sucking
Already underway.
The astronaut, wound round its cord,
The slack-eyed hero, the virtueless saint
Is selfing itself into light.

I gasp, from fear.
Little glue-boy, little glue-girl,
What will you come to?

No peace, no peace.
Your home all storm, a tempest of blood,
And in all that ocean one swimmer is stroking,

Stroking and stroking,
Keen to the sound
Of thunder underwater.

And I who will be inexplicably perfect
To you for all your living days
Gaze into the gray of your hollows.

Mystery

A scene familiar from late night,
the husband in the cellar,
struggling to rinse blood from cloth.

Now is the time for the washday miracle,
what did the paper say about removing blood,
hot water sets its rusty paws as evidence

and the world will know what was done.
See how the gelatin beads along the mesh,
the plasm of life splashed the length of it, dyed.

Taste -- like coins in the pocket too long,
of things suspect, gone wrong,
of what should ever be in edging out.
Blood, blood, and the wretched Lady
wrung hands and wailed for the
perfumes of Arabia, and a gallant

man and the blade subsumed.
Blood, blood, and the last survivor
plunges the mass back into the cold.

Always the press says something snapped in him,
a stain that spread, a marinade of bed.
And the bodies lying in the room overhead

are still now, the seeping at low ebb,
and the red-eyed husband mounts the stairs
and stands beside the sleeping wife

and newborn child.

Baby danger

The night the baby was born,
And the midwife left,
And our friends finished off the champagne,
We wrapped it twitching in a white cloth
And set it between our bodies in the bed.

Sleeping rigid as steel bars,
Terrified we'd roll upon the being
And smother the life,
And dreamed of it sliding to its death
Under dark waters,
Dreamed it fell from countertops,
Chairs, cracked like eggs on the baked varnish
Of the world.

We dreamed of leaving it exposed
And found it blue and chapped upon snow,
Or turning one moment and looking back
To the crib rocking empty, empty,
All of our reasons
Suddenly missing.

There was a decade of our lives or more
When we could lie down upon cold tracks
And drink and nod off
And not worry about morning.

Now everything is heat,
And distant thunder.
The moon puts its shoulder to the shade,
Peering in like the dumbstruck
Passenger on
Two frightened adults
And a small sleeping girl.

Hero

Roman candle of my loins,
nature's ne plus ultra, dauphin,
stainless splinter, emissary,
pure knight upon a steaming steed.

Dismayer of sisters, builder of castles,
ardent acrobat of mother love,
vanquisher of luscious ladies
and sweet suckler of their breasts.

Stockpiler of blunt weaponry,
unblinking crusher of adversaries,
sworn enemy of all that is evil.
hands on hips scorner of utmost odds,

Cruel master of gravity and ball,
clasper of the unshatterable blade,
glad gladiator, king killer
and burier of old men.

Yet when you shamble to the toilet
at night for water and lie down
again in bed, your white limbs
enfolding, an ampersand of flesh,

Tentative as a clutch of eggs,
dappled aqua, thin as glass,
skin transparent, brow damp –
a sleeping boy your secret identity.

The balloons

On my daughter's four-month anniversary,
I buy a dozen helium balloons
at a toy shop,
red
yellow
green
blue,
and stuff them in the back seat
of the VW.
But the day is warm, and I
forgetfully
open the passenger window
to let in air,
and as I accelerate up a hill,
I can't prevent them from bobbling out,
one after another,
crowding one another
like terrified tourists.
Pulling over by the side of the street
I watch them fight their way up
over the treetops and wires,
red
yellow
green
blue,
out of reach
before I can catch them,
gone into sky like the years
of a little girl's life.

Family life

Baby peruses
Her plastic red
Doughnut while
Father and
Mother suck on
The Times so
She will not
Feel funny.

Lullaby

Rest your drowsy cheek,
my girl, quiet on my prickling arm.
Dream your dream of lapping waters
crested on this human form.
The tides are breathing, you and I,
in your small clench and my tight heart.
Tonight we fill the grave with stones
And slumber in the summer's dew.
And all I make are promises
Which cannot come true.
I will not give you away,
My girl, I will never make you cry,
Nor morning find us far apart,
Nor this hand gone away
From you.

In the night

My little girl awoke in the night
quaking with fright,
and I held her and explained
that the monsters were gone,
they were never there at all,
and the look she gave me was, I recall,
almost one of pity, as if
I were the doomed one, mine the swift
tumble coming soon.
I rocked her to sleep in her room
and thought of every plane
I wanted to see go down,
every siren shearing the dark
were heading toward my part
of town, my god, and all I
have is a child to protect me.

Jonathan under the hackberry tree

Backyard radio baseball game
My son on my lap looking up
Through springtime treetops
As we sway in our canvass swing.

Our father who art in hammock
Hollow be thy chest.
One man on, Puckett steps up
And lines a shot to right,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy heartbeat drum
Now and at the hour of death amen.

I thought I would have more poems
Welling up in me about my little son,
Telling images of flesh and skin
A single drop of an ancestor's blood
Roaring down the tunnel of time
Through this bleating baby heart.

The side is retired, two men on, game over.
I want to tell you not to worry,
It's still only April, there are months to play.

But it is as if you don't even care,
You are somewhere else, you are not yet here.
The things you see you do not know,
You only know me as a warm spot in time.
Your brain stirs invisibly like the worm
In its bag, that one day will step out
And have limbs and wings and everything,
Will talk and have opinions.

Too late for me, though, a spectator
Who misplaced his program, open-mouthed
And blinking, as good as dead,
And never knew what hit me.

Look at you, Jonathan, little nag,
Three weeks old and still not found
Anything you like in this world
Except lying on your back on my lap
On the swing under tree that spreads

Above you like a firework of green

And the light breaking through
In diamond peeks. Your eyes jerk
From rim to rim like a drunk on a train,
Your legs heavy and useless
Like bread soaked with dew.

Children because they are so alive
Spell death to every thing.

Mysterious man, mess-making machine,
Render of night and enemy of art,
Nothing comes. You cry, we rock,
The wet of your diaper like tears.

The weeks I spend attending to you are like
An old woman pouring liquid from the jar
Of her life into your plastic cup.

How I wish you would smile at me,
Though it be only a muscular accident,
I would write you a check from a secret account

That would wipe me out. I would pay to be
Your baby mind, set high in the tree by that evil
Mother in the lullabye song,

We would follow the motion
Of branch against twig against spinning sky
Where all is revealed in the rockabye
White blind beam
Of love.

Thank you

To the pirate faced biker
streaming slowly down
Marshall Avenue,
colors jazzed in the
night time light,
front wheeled Harley
out to here, black
jacket man with beard
of steel, who saw my
one year old boy craning
in his blue stroller,
and waved.

Old Saw

Out walking with Red, we came upon
an ancient cottonwood tree, standing like
a giant fork in the forest.
Into that fork another tree had fallen,
so that the original cottonwood stood straight
while the dead fallen tree leaned into its crux,
and every breeze made the live tree groan
as the dead trunk rubbed against it,
it was the sound of a balloon roughly handled,
or metal failing underwater,
like a natural cello's lowest string
rubbed raw of its rosin.

Eventually the dead tree had worked a groove
in the crotch of the live one,
and with the passage of time was wearing its way
downward, splitting it down the middle.
One main limb of the live tree has died,
and owls and birds and other things
have made their apartments in the soft dry flesh.
Rachel and I stared up at this natural saw
and we took one another's hands instinctively
as if to assure ourselves
that the rubbing of one life against another life
was a warming thing always.
But love can come into our lives and life move one.
What is left when love remains
sawing slowly on our limbs?

Happiness

When someone is next to the person she loves,
the water in her cells laps at its thousands
of beaches, pebbles and rock
and sharp discs of light
breathe from the pores of her cheeks.
A whirlpool springs from a cloud to the west,
by an island egg in a happy sea,
a sparrow hawk flies off toward
a bank of violet mountains.
It lights on a limb of a tall green tree,
the stars alight in her branches.

Roads

Roads speed through the countryside,
every bend a mystery, every moment of unevenness a jolt
into something new and not known.
Roads on islands are conflicted because they do not get
you anywhere really,
they are failures and sorry.
The dead end road is indeed a death, sudden and irreversible,
we avoid them at all costs
until the one time we wish to go someplace and not return.
Macadam, asphalt, concrete, slag,
blacktop, gravel, cobbles, tar.
Mountain roads that turn cars into athletes, grinding uphill
and then falling, falling all the way down,
a shiver down every spine.
Shore roads and causeways that lick the water
and the water licks them.
City streets boulevards illuminated as if each passing car
were on parade.
Alleys where cats trip by on tiptoes.
Frontage roads like caged animals prowling their perimeters,
pining to be free.
Expressways and beltways that traffic courses through
like blood through muscle,
cars by the thousand, every destination important.
suburban lanes that guide us to our garages,
the narrow road that takes me to your house.