

MOTHER OUTSIDER


A Project

by

Carissa D'Augelli


Summer 2019

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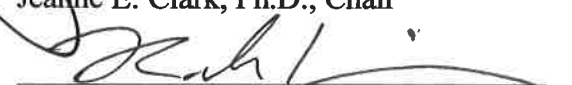


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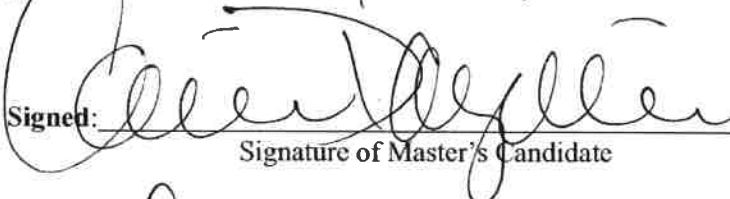
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MOTHER OUTSIDER

A Project
Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

by

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Summer 2019

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To Angelo, Aurora, Anjelli,

Aisilyn, & Talia

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank first and foremost Dr. Jeanne E. Clark for putting up with the strange journey my poetry has taken. Your constant pushing helped me to develop images and lines that I wouldn't have been able to write otherwise. You have taught me what it means to be in a community of writers, that there are no Poetry Police looking for a chance to bust me for stepping out of line, and how to really look at my work in a critical sense. The process of this project alone taught me that I have to kick my own ass, but that I need it kicked in the right direction sometimes. Having you as my mentor and teacher all of these years is an experience of a lifetime, and I wouldn't be standing here today without you pushing me forward.

I would also like to thank Rob Davidson for being my mentor in teaching Creative Writing. I valued every second of the semester we shared, even when I felt like I failed and messed everything up. Thank you for showing me that sometimes firm is better when teaching non-English majors.

I also want to thank Dr. Tracy Butts; your class is one I will never forget, nor your welcoming smile; Dr. Geoff Baker for pushing me to present my term paper at the HFA symposium—it was by far one of my favorite papers to write; and the many other professors in the department who didn't accept anything less than my best.

Most importantly, I want to thank my family. My parents, Alysa and Tim Maddox, for giving me the space and encouragement to do the things I found interesting and pushing me to get back to school. My sister and brother, Jacquelyn and Brandon Maddox, for reading my work, coming to my readings, and encouraging me to keep going. My wonderful husband, Angelo D'Augelli, who has been by my side since I began the crazy coaster of grad school. You are my

rock, the one who listens to all my shitty first drafts, my best friend, and my muse. My in-laws, Barbara and Greg D'Augelli and Mike and Marie D'Augelli who have helped watch kids, listened to my poems, and been utterly welcoming and loving. And my four step-daughters, Aurora, Anjelli, Aisilyn, and Talia. You girls have been more than a blessing to me. You are the fuel in my poetry, the ones who keep me going even when I am beyond the exhaustion point, and the ones who bring so much love, life, hugs, and joy to my world.

I love you all, none of this would be possible without all of you. Thank you to the moon and back.

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ABSTRACT

MOTHER OUTSIDER

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Master of Arts in English

California State University, Chico

Summer 2019

“Mother Outsider” is a collection of poems that explores non-conventional motherhood while also pushing against cultural assumptions of motherhood. Questioning these societal assumptions and the speaker’s own questions of herself are central to the poems in this collection. Uncertainties surrounding whether or not step-mothers are “true” mothers is also a major aspect. Some poems in this collection will talk back to the societal voices saying that motherhood happens when a woman gives birth. “Mother Outsider” invites readers to see an alternative mother on a journey through legitimacy and validation.

MOTHER OUTSIDER: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I am a step-mother of four young girls (5, 7, 10, 12). Being a step-mother, I am a hybrid-mother; I am both mother and not. I am a mother in the sense that I help parent and care for children, yet I have not given birth. I have taken on a role, combined it with my inexperience and expectations, and have declared it my own. I call my children my own because I care for them in that way, treating them as nothing less than if I carried them in my body. As a hybrid-mother, I have the same responsibilities, the same expectations as a biological mother, yet often times I'm not held in the same regard. For instance, I have no legal rights to my children, even though I care for them five days a week. Every time we meet someone new, I have to explain my relation to my children. I constantly have to prove myself because of assumptions strangers have about step-mothers specifically. Questions arise when we visit doctors' offices, buy school supplies, or even shop for groceries. In order for me to take my children to the doctor or the dentist, I have to file a consent form with my husband's signature, stating I am allowed to authorize medical care. Legitimacy matters to me because I love my children, would do anything for them, and put their needs above my own. This struggle for legitimacy outside of our home and family and often in front of my children can leave me feeling the "step"—as in a step away—of "step-mother" more than the mother, a "mother-outsider."

I also hold another hybridity in my life: mother and poet. Becoming a step-mother has shifted my poems toward my new status as a step-mother and as a poet-mother. As a mother-poet, I entered the community of mother-poets, poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Both Plath and Sexton wrote poetry that was autobiographical, yet crafted a sense of immediacy, a sense of confession. As a mother-poet and step-mother, my work is highly autobiographical and in it, I shape a contemporary confessional voice, in the tradition of Plath and Sexton, as well

as others. The aesthetic of confession and immediacy in my poems is revealed through the persona of a mother-speaker who is unsure of her status as a mother. The poems constantly cycle between questioning and legitimizing.

As I navigated through this new journey, I documented my experiences as they happened, putting raw experience on the page. One day, I was sitting at the kitchen table listening to my third step-daughter create stories with such excitement. In a moment of awe, I felt compelled to write about her—I was compelled for the first time in months to write. After jumping from the table to grab pen and paper in order to capture this young girl, I let the flood gates open. I wrote, and I wrote, and I wrote. I saw myself changing as I became a mother through my poems. I also saw myself as a poet beginning to change. This change shaped an aesthetics immediacy as well. I put raw experience on the page, working from the actual moment in time, to a created moment; one molded and deliberately shaped, one fabricated to cause certain emotions and images to come forward.

Prior to my first semester of the Master's Program in August 2016, the lines of my poetry were filled with bodies and sexuality. My speakers were finding their way, thinking through what nakedness truly was about, and being in awe of how bodies came together. Claiming myself as an erotic poet since I was a teenager, I filled notebooks and folders with erotic verse. The erotic side of myself was still active during this change—being intimate with this new partner and exploring his body—but it wasn't the focus of my speakers; motherhood took over. And it wasn't until a few months into my first semester that I fully realized that I was no longer solely an erotic poet, but a mother-poet learning how to walk, something to which this collection is speaking.

My process had been writing poems based on experiences once time has passed, yet all of the poems in this collection are based on experiences that are happening now. Because of this, my process has changed: I am now writing to process. The first drafts of my poems are that process stage, fully documenting the actual. What comes out of this new process through revisions are questions to be considered and consciously crafted poems, a constructed voice of immediacy. In an interview with Josh Anthony, Caylie Herrmann, Kimberly Povloski, and Taylor Waring, Maggie Smith talks about this particular change in her own poems:

The poems are more about me, more about the existential shift that comes with being in charge of other people in this world when I can't even sort it out for myself. I don't know how to process 21st century existence, but I have to because I have to process it for other people. That is the biggest challenge and what inspired a lot of poems in [*Good Bones*]. How do I do this? The difficulty of it.

The bittersweetness of it. (91)

I identify with this statement because this collection, though my kids are very much a part of it, is more about my experience and how I'm processing and navigating my new life and motherhood. What follows are questions and doubt. This collection asks questions about what it means to be a mother: What is a mother? As a step-mother, am I a real mother? What are the roles of step-mothers in the lives of children who just want love and to know that they're wanted? My poems challenge the cultural assumptions that a woman only becomes a mother when a child grows in her body. In the poems in this collection, raw experience finds its voice through a constructed persona, through the questions *she* raises, the images and moments *she* insists have legitimacy.

I wanted to be a mother since as long as I can remember—always seeing myself with a large family in my dreams and fantasies. My parents were married in 1988 when my mother was 21 and my father was 22. I was born six months later. I had this image in my head of myself getting married and having children at the age of 21 because that’s the pattern I observed. Birthday after birthday came and went—no husband or children. Looking back, I was a child in my 20s; I couldn’t imagine having children then, even though that was my dream.

I was 27 when I met Angelo and the girls. I hadn’t started grad school yet, and I only saw the girls half of the week; things were pretty smooth, and we experienced things I didn’t think possible. When I started grad school, I realized just how much needed to be sacrificed to maintain the life I wanted (degrees and career) and the life I had (children and partner). I didn’t understand just how much time and sleep would go to the way side in order to ensure survival and stability. I didn’t understand at the time just how needy they would be or how much attention they yearned for. This is one aspect of motherhood I hadn’t grasped or prepared for. I address this feeling in several of my poems, one being “A postcard to my former-self”:

Anyway, this town is lovely—
 (Why did I ever want
 to leave it?)—
all of my days are filled
with activities; never a dull moment!
 (Like a soccer mom,
 sans soccer.)
Or alone time...
 (Did you know that
 the bathroom is no longer
 a place for peace?)
but I don’t mind.
 (~~But part of me does.~~)

Maybe that’s the sleep
deprivation who’s talking...

In these stanzas, the speaker is talking to her former-self and giving a slight insight into aspects of being a mother that she didn't think about, especially that there's no "alone time" or "a dull moment." I do this through the parenthesis because what's said isn't truly meant for the recipient of the postcard—it's an aside, something said under her breath that only the reader of the poem and the speaker knows was said. I also strike out several lines in this poem with the same intentions.

Reading contemporary poets such as Ellen Bass, Maggie Smith, and Sharon Olds, I found a community of mother-writers. These poets are using their structures, language, and imagery to explore motherhood. For example, the way Olds describes her daughter's changing body in "Bread" highlights the curves, the skin, even the fact that her daughter will "be sliced for the having, the tasting, and the / giving of life." Olds examines her daughter through the lens of how the future will see her. Olds is looking at a growing young girl, yet the world will begin to see her as a woman. The poem also asks readers to see her daughter in this way. In "Good Bones," Maggie Smith states that she'll keep certain aspects of the world "from [her] children." The aspects are the bad things, the things that will change their perspective on the world that might prevent them from creating change. Her use of repetition and sad images asks the reader to follow her words to her children, asking to keep the curtains drawn. Some of the poems that these mother-poets write are on uncertainties as mothers. For example, Ellen Bass' poem "For My Daughter on Her Twenty-First Birthday" deals with a mother confessing how her daughter has "over and over" "illuminat[ed] all my fears, my weaknesses, my sins." The tone she takes here is one that shows the vulnerability of being a mother, how a mother may think she's a mom, but it's not until the child is older that she feels unqualified to be one. I, myself, am full of uncertainties as a mother: am I doing a "good" job, am I a "true" mother? I see my own work

standing next to these strong women, sharing experience of motherhood and offering my perspective of step-motherhood. Like Bass, my poetry asks questions and wrestles with legitimacy. Like Olds and Smith, my poetry discusses interactions with my children and the changes they go through.

Hybridity is when two separate literary genres merge together to form a third. My own work isn't hybrid in any sense, but I connected to one hybrid writer, Sarah Vap. Her piece "Oskar's Cars" features unconventional lines and stanzas, but more importantly it blurs the boundaries of the lyric poem and the essay, revealing Vap's own boundary disintegration. In her chapter "Assault Hybridity: The Disintegrating Lyric/Mother/I" in *Family Resemblances: An Anthology and Exploration of 8 Hybrid Literary Genres*, Vap explains,

I was trying to document the "content" as well as the process, and no existing form (not lyric poem alone, not academic or critical or nonfiction essay alone, not narrative alone) would come close to containing this thing that I was experiencing/enduring/bring. So hybridity is what happened. Like my son, it seemed as if "Oskar's Cars" made itself. (23)

Genre broke apart and turned into something some would call a lyric essay. For example, her piece titled "Oskar's Cars: A Mothering Mind and the Creative Process" is made up of paragraphs and single lines. Some of her paragraphs are fully indented while others aren't. It is a lyric poem without boundaries. It is an essay searching for ground. Vap has created a structure that reveals the boundary dissolution she experienced when she had her son. Her piece is lyrical, autobiographical, and question driven. I connected to her work as a poet—my own work being almost completely autobiographical and wrestling with questions—but I also connected to her as a mother. Vap further says:

When my son was born, the boundaries of body, heart, mind, even spirit—they dissolved, were battered, foundered, split apart, in ways that I wanted. And also in ways that stressed me deeply. That gave me unprecedented joy, and unprecedented frustration—as a person and as a writer. (23)

Once I became a mother, the subjects of my poetry changed, but so did the boundaries between woman and mother—“the boundaries of [my] body, heart, mind, [and] spirit” expanded through my poetry. I saw this even more as I read Vap’s work. The clear frustration from my reoccurring speaker and the sheer joy her children have brought to her life stand out in many of my pieces. But I also explore the boundaries of motherhood through questions about my uncertainties and those who don’t yet view me as a mother. My work has erupted those boundaries of “traditional” motherhood. I am now working with a more immediate voice, or a voice that’s trying to capture the immediacy. For example, in “Children I didn’t birth and children I want,” one uncertainty that pops up is whether my own biological child will take away the love I have for my step-children. The voice here contemplating what it would mean to go from step-mother to biological mother. In “A fridge holds more than food and batteries,” I’m uncertain if I’ll ever be a part of this pre-made family and if I’ll ever have my own presence on my mother-in-law’s fridge. And yet, in other poems, such as “Maybe I’m Scared,” I’m asserting my experiences with my step-daughters while speaking to the immediacy of my fears in questioning whether I’ll lose the love I have for my step-daughters. After reading Vap, I took on a new title: the hybrid-mother.

~ ~ ~

As a young poet, I was very resistant to writing in a structure—feeling too much pressure to make everything perfect and confined. After becoming a mother, I found I sometimes needed structure and after reading Maggie Smith’s *Good Bones*, I turned to the couplet as a structure I

could use. When thinking of couplets, I think of connection, intimacy, and familiarity due to the pairing of the lines. Couplets also signify space, specifically the space between the stanzas and what the couplets hold between them. For example, in Smith’s poem “This Town,” the speaker returns to her hometown and sees people, places, and things she grew up with. Smith’s couplets reinforce a connection between the speaker and the town to which she has just returned:

The boy you loved is a dozen
years behind you, whatever that translates to in miles.
He’s married to someone else and has a daughter,
and so do you. His parents don’t live in the house
you crept to, the house in the sticks.

Returning to this place releases a flood of memories for the speaker. The couplet structure reinforces the memory of a relationship she once had with a boy she no longer loves or knows. The spaces between the couplets suggest the space now between them; they also suggest the space and time that has passed between the speaker and the town itself. As a writer, I saw how Smith’s couplets moved and spoke—I decided to employ couplets in my own poem “Homemade Roots.” The couplets in my poem indicate connection: my speaker to her hometown. The couplets also indicate space: she’s thinking back to not wanting to be stuck in this town. For example:

Friends said I would want out, though—
I would want to leave this place,

travel the world, become everything
I ever wanted. I had lofty dreams, yes—

.....

My roots are growing
longer—burrowing into the ground

I walk with daily.
The bridges scattered

through Bidwell Park
lead me home,

again. This is my home.

The couplets here show connection. Much like the roots mentioned, the speaker is even more embedded in the soil of the town she wanted to leave. The connection happens through the roots are now growing with her new family. Much like the way Smith's speaker connects to a place she left and then moves back to, my speaker is letting go of the faraway dreams she once had and is adopting new ones of family and rootedness.

~ ~ ~

Motherhood has changed me as a person. Due to the suddenness of this situation, I'm learning as I go. When I have felt alone on this journey of mine, I have turned to poetry as I have in the past. At first, I wrote from raw experience—capturing every detail I could and every emotion that came along with it. I wrote in this way to help get through the initial steps of being a mother. I wanted to be understood as a mother. I wanted to also understand what was happening around me. I wanted to give myself something to read because I hadn't come across other poets doing what I'm doing—writing from the point of view of a step-mother. One way of doing this work is to shape the raw experience through point of view. Most of the poems in this collection are written in first person and are largely based on my experiences, yet the narrator's voice is a constructed one, shaped through relatable images, paces and tensions in the lines, and through the interruption of the speaker's questions. And while the majority of the poems are written in first person, in the poem "Reminders," I employed the second-person perspective.

The “you” addressed in lines such as

You’ll tell them
over and over,
to do something so simple,
you’ll tell them to clean their room
after tripping over their clothes,
stepping on Legos

is both the reader as well as the worried and anxious step-mother narrator of the poem.

“Reminders” is a note for my reader—to potentially form a bond, creating a space to see themselves in my scenarios. That said, I also wrote this poem for myself—though a majority of the experiences aren’t mine—as way to tell myself that everything will be okay.

Though I wrote this poem to help with uncertainties as a parent, I’ve written others as a way to walk through my uncertainties as a step-mother. For example, in “Mother of the Year,” my speaker is unsure about whether or not she’s a mother. She’s unsure because though her partner and family see her as a mother, the outside “community” simply does not.

One of the uncertainties in my poem “Mother of the Year” is if the speaker is a real mother. She faces many people who she perceives judge her:

Schools, doctors, biological
mothers view me
as an imposter—
the perpetual Milli Vanilli,
mouth moving with words
spoken by a *true* mother,
the CIA agent, set out
to destroy motherhood’s agenda—
God forbid I’m just a woman
who loves children as her own.

This perceived judgment from biological parents and other authorities with whom she comes in contact causes the speaker to second-guess herself. The speaker expresses a tone of frustration, but nonetheless succumbs to the judgment: she's an imposter. This is shown by the italicized "true" and the image of Milli Vanilli. Opening the poem with frustration and strong images paves the way for the laundry list of ways the speaker convinces herself and attempts to convince others that she's a mother:

Do I need to present
my credentials
to the Board of Mothers
in order to be a parent?
Would a resumé be necessary?
They would see:
 vomit in my hand,
 headaches from tantrums,
 my face when asked a 1000
 times for a thing,
 the amount of time
 I take for them,
 fights about changing
 underwear,
 cleaning rooms,
 doing homework,
 being nice.
And in Subsection A,
they'll find a scroll from all the times
 I fucked up because
 mothering is hard.

The flood of details that comes at the end of this stanza is meant to be a laundry list, a list of "credentials" as the speaker states, for those who refuse to view her as a real mother. The structure of this section is crucial. The indents of each item look like something on a checklist—as if she's needing to prove herself by completing each task (much like I am trying to prove myself as a poet and a mother). This moment is also highly sarcastic and an assertive move for

the poem. Tony Hoagland in his essay “Sad Anthropologists: The Dialectical Use of Tone,” states:

Tone is such an ambient, fluid, and internal quality in writing, one constructed from so many shifting elements (diction, music, pacing, image, syntax), that to define it is an elusive, probably impossible task. The baseline definition one encounters most often is that tone is 1) the attitude of the writer toward her subject or 2) of a speaker toward her audience. (83-84)

For my speaker to give a list for the reader, she’s talking back, proving that she does exactly the same things other parents do, and that her actions and behaviors count; they reveal commitment. The sarcasm insists the reader rethink their views/assumptions on motherhood. The tone is deliberate and directed at the audience and those who doubt the speaker’s legitimacy as a mother.

The wonderings of whether or not I’m a mother expands into many of my poems, but in “The Virgin Womb of a Mother,” I actually talk back to myself, providing legitimacy to combat those uncertainties, regardless of what others have to say about it. I am being assertive and upfront, questioning why with all of this evidence the speaker still wrestles with uncertainty:

But I am a mother,
Womb, don’t you see?
I make sure laundry
has been done,
field questions from young
curious brains—do art
with the intention
of plastering the walls.
I have experienced
late nights
cleaning vomit while
trying not to wake
the ones still sleeping.
The exhaustion from driving
to all activities and scheduling
play dates—forgetting

my own friends and obligations.
And not to mention
the worry of sending them
back to their mom's
out of fear
that they might
get hurt, again.

In this stanza, the speaker asserts that she is “a mother” and that she’s doing all of the things “true” mothers do. This moment gives strength to the speaker and gives the speaker power in standing up to those who doubt her. The uncertainties of being a mother are still there, but she has to remind herself that she isn’t what others (or the voice in her head) say. The uncertainties all through this collection are part of who I am now—I am an ever-evolving mother-poet. But though I have uncertainties, I challenge them along the way—many of my poems speak back to the voice that says I am not a mother.

~ ~ ~

When I wrote the poems in “Mother Outsider,” I had the intention of staying true to the moment. It was a way to talk about the situation and my frustrations. But it was also a way to talk about my children and show others who they are. In turn, my poems ended up being three pages long or more, all the while feeling that the poem still had more to say. I didn’t have any authorial distance because the poem’s subjects were happening in real time. I realized that in keeping details that were more autobiographically actual, I was sacrificing strong images. I didn’t want my images to get bogged down by unnecessary details and description. Through revisions, I was no longer foregrounding the actual but was reaching for what is emotionally true; I moved from the actual to the confessional. I needed to think of ways to present the moment without fidelity to unnecessary details “that really happened.” One way was to cut dialogue that actually happened to pave a path for my images to shine. For example, in “Maybe

I'm Scared," I highlight the light above the piano so the readers can visualize the red in Anjelli's hair and her scrunched up face:

The light from above the piano
dances in their eyes—
ready to express their thoughts.

Anjelli—the great ball of fire—
sits on the white leather couch,
face scrunched, redder than her hair—
Are you going to have a baby?
I don't want more siblings.

In the original draft of this poem, I had more lines of conversation, especially my response to Anjelli's disdain for having another sibling in the family. In an attempt to have authorial distance, I reduced the moment to an image: "face scrunched, redder than her hair." The poem now informs the reader of the reason for her face being that way, but it also gives an image of this young girl sitting on a white couch whose face and hair are red. I chose to focus on this image because it captures Anjelli's personality when she's upset or resistant. She's sticking out like a sore thumb—much like the conundrum the speaker is in.

In my poem, "The word that has gripped my identity—the word I am not allowing to define me," the speaker picks apart her feelings toward the word "step-kid" in order to find answers:

I never liked
"step" kids.
The word, with strong
sounds—marking territory,
a hard "t" and "p"
gives authority and hesitation,
an unfeeling word,
cold and distant—
conjuring images of orphans
whose parents have died.

That sound carries a sense

that this new part
means nothing—these kids
are just baggage along
for the ride into death—
that there’s no love
from the “parent,”
no support, no care.

As if Edward Scissorhands
was the parent—cutting
away
the useless growth,
creating a different masterpiece—
Or The Queen of Hearts
yelling
Off with their heads!

Why does such a harsh
word exist for an extra set of hands?
Or to describe someone
who took on a responsibility
that wasn’t her own?

The speaker is discussing her dislike for the word “step-kid” through images. She’s asking questions (“why does such a harsh word / exist for an extra set of hands?”) that most likely don’t have an answer or will ever have an answer. There is no resolution for her in this moment. I am attempting to strip down the raw experience of my speaker to focus on the stronger images as well (i.e. Edward Scissorhands and The Queen of Hearts).

One of the goals I have with my images is to make them stick with the reader. I want the reader to have one of my images return to them long after they have read the piece. This means that I’m asking the reader to stay with the moment, to wrestle with the questions and the images that are being presented in my poems. I want the image to haunt, something that Robert Hass taught me in his essay, “Images.” He states:

Images haunt . . . Images are not quite ideas, they are stiller than that, with less implications outside themselves. And they are not myth, they do not have that

explanatory power; they are nearer to pure story. Nor are they always metaphors; they do not say this is that, they say this is ... And it is something like that, some feeling in the arrest of the image that what perishes and what lasts forever have been brought into conjunction, and accompanying the sensation is the feeling of release from the self. (275)

Hass says that an image should haunt. Images that haunt are ones the reader wrestles with, struggles with, yearns to grasp. What Hass is asserting here is that an image should be wrestled with—each reader wrestling in a different way. With respect to what Hass is saying, I'm using images in such a way that makes the reader confront their assumptions and their own experiences as parents and children and to reconsider if motherhood is actually determined through biology. Creating haunting images, figurative images, make this collection something that I want to read rather than being solely about my life. I attempted to create a haunting series of images in my poem, "A fridge holds more than food & batteries":

I've viewed these voiceless faces
countless moments,
each time finding things
hidden from me.
Angelo's hair, once blonde,
puzzles me as he smiles
back—*have I ever noticed
the red pail behind him before?*

I ponder the memories
that aren't mine—
an anthropologist's aide
in the field of discovery—
children holding grandchildren,
family friends, relatives—
bits and pieces from a past
I never got to experience—

a sadness tends
to overcome

my heart, one
of longing, one
of regret, one
of wanting—wondering
where I fit in.

The stanzas here are giving the image of the speaker standing on the sidelines. She's sad, she's curious, she's an impersonal outsider, a mother outsider. She's wondering where she fits in, whether she can fit in. According to Tony Hoagland's essay "'Tis Backed Like a Weasel': The Slipperiness of Metaphor," "... there is in the use of metaphor something faintly opposed to reality. Somber or joyful, rational or surreal, descriptive or fantastic, a metaphor is intrinsically breaking away from fidelity and continuity, an allergic reaction to too much reality" (31). I am using the anthropologist as a way to bring another layer to this poem. It's as if my speaker is discovering the memories on the fridge—the images of the past—years in the future. The metaphor elevates the emotion and scene.

Ellen Bass' poem "Relax" was a poem that haunted me in regard to images, offering possibilities for what I might try in one of my own poems. The images in "Relax" stand out to the reader in very specific ways. For example:

Your husband will sleep
with a girl your daughter's age, her breasts spilling
out of her blouse. Or your wife
will remember she's a lesbian
and leave you for the woman next door.

For the speaker, it's not just that the husband is cheating with a younger woman who is almost a child, but that "her breasts [are] spilling / out of her blouse." This image is shocking, this is the body of a child which causes the speaker and reader to sexualize the child. Here is a moment in which description of an image leaves an impression, a punch to the reader. I wanted to capture that impression in my poem "Reminders":

They're going to lie,
bicker, rough house,
break bowls and plates
in a moment of anger
from the set
you bought in Japan,
keeping them safe for years.

The intention of this poem is to bring forth images that are utterly personal to me, but also to make them relatable to others. The sound of the broken plates on a kitchen floor or even the image of a valuable item being destroyed in anger is something a reader can relate to. Not only that, but this also makes clear that the speaker kept the child/children safe for as long as she could, yet is not able to prevent hurt/pain.

In *The Art of Description: World Into Word*, Mark Doty states, "It's incomplete to say that description describes consciousness; it's more like a balance between terms, saying what *you* see and saying what you *see*" (45). Creating authorial distance means I must also strengthen my descriptions. Doty is telling me to not only focus on the specifics of a speaker (the "what *you* see"), but to also give the reader something to relate to (the "what you *see*"). With respect to the immediacy my poems are conveying, what is on the page is a made thing, it's a constructed work of art. I am using images in order to show that immediacy, giving the reader something to relate to and something for them to *see* while describing what the *speaker* is seeing. Doty is referring to the literal image here, but also an author's awareness that the poem is an artful recreation of a memory. The sophisticated reader will know this is a construction rather than a literal snapshot of the moment, even as the feeling of immediacy is present. After reading Doty's words, I attempt to provide a balance in the construction of my poems. For example, in "Sweet (little) Lies," I'm using description to not only show what my *speaker* sees, but also what she *sees*:

Seeing those closed plastic
bags full of delicious goodies

on the shelf of every
grocery store and house
days before Halloween
brought fantasies of the booty
we would claim
on All Hallow's Eve—
the mountains of Reese's
Cups, M&Ms (to be used
for bargaining), Milky Ways,
and Snickers—gave
our young lives anticipation
and impatience for October 31st.

This stanza is not only one that is specific to my speaker, but it's relatable—my speaker is describing what she's *seeing*—the aisles of candy—and what *she's* seeing—the impatience of a young child wanting candy. The literal image of the candy on the shelves and children going through their loot is real and tangible.

Sarah Vap describes how becoming a mother changed her and gave her “unprecedented joy, and unprecedented frustration” (23). The same dissonance can be found in my poem “Childbearing.” The speaker is coping and internalizing the change in herself and accepting a seemingly eternal pain due to not being her children's biological mother:

I've given up correcting people
on their reaction to me—
I always feel diminished
and judged once
I've revealed the truth—
like I'm not responsible
to care and love another
human being, like I
am simply the professor
and they're my students,
impersonal and distant—

especially by biological
parents, their tone
having pity laced
with fake enthusiasm,
a hot poker breaking

through my skin,
searing my womb
while I smile back
and privately mourn later.

The images regarding the speaker's womb are visceral and raw, highlighting pain. Through the use of background information, the speaker reveals that this is a long-standing and perpetual pain—she's felt disappointment in herself because she's not yet given birth. The poem begins with a quote from *The Hours* where Virginia Woolf is viewing Nelly (her maid) and her movements in the kitchen as tender as a mother. That image of a non-biological mother being on the outside while watching biological mothers reveals her uncertainty of ever being a "real" mother. And it's through this image that pain is revealed. The pain is supported by the image of "a hot poker breaking / through my skin." This violent image is not just metaphorical, but physical. The reader not only can imagine the moment, but they can feel it. It's haunting, it begs for wrestling, it seeks resolution. The speaker's tone in this moment is frustrated, the speaker wants the reader to feel what she is feeling.

~ ~ ~

In Sarah Vap's hybrid piece, "Oskar's Cars: A Mothering Mind and the Creative Process," she makes the case that creative process and motherhood cannot be separated, yet they are separate; there is something between writing a poem and having a child. But the two cannot be compared: "I mean this: there is something that I can't yet explain about poetry and about mothering. I don't want to make parallels; they aren't parallel. A baby is not a poem, and a child has nothing in common with a book" (28). I've thought of my poems as children—letting them freely speak while guiding/molding them into something more through revision. As a mother now, I see what Vap means—children cannot be poems, but I can create images of who my children are on the page. Vap's quote brought my yearnings throughout my poems into a new

light. I realized that I am dealing with, or rather, embracing my own hybridity as a mother in my poems.

I am an evolving poet; a new identity has taken over my previous one—I am a mother, yet I am a poet. I am a hybrid mother: I have not been pregnant, so I'm not a biological mother; I have four young step-daughters so I am a step-mother. My own hybridity stems from these children. I'm this weird "other" mother with all the same responsibilities of a biological mother. Embracing this hybridity is a process, just like embracing motherhood as an "other" is a process. As Sarah Vap puts it: "... I am simply becoming a new woman—this strangely concentrated and scattered, more selfless, bodied woman" (31). What comes with evolution is a continuing to explore new subjects and questions in my work.

Going beyond this project, I want to see my work getting into the hands of other mothers and parents who have experienced some of what I have. Thus far, I have not found writers writing about step-motherhood. In my work, I'm giving a voice and combatting cultural tropes and assumptions. I have looked into magazines and publications where my work would fit. There are many publications on mothers and motherhood, and though only some of their mission statements and readership aligned with my work, I am confident that my work will find the right readers. One magazine is *Literary Mama*. This publication gathers work on motherhood and experiences of mothers. Of course, I would enjoy my work being published in *Poetry Magazine* or *Pushcart*, but I need to reach my readers, and this is a start that hopefully will lead to a full-length book.

Furthermore, expanding my poetry beyond this collection, I want to explore more about my children's relationship with the world. This collection is really about me, but there is so much more to dive into regarding motherhood. Two of my children are becoming teenagers in the next

two years, my youngest is starting kindergarten in August—I have yet to plumb their experiences. Not only will I be writing more about my children and perhaps even through persona/their voices, I will have to engage their biological mother at some point. Though there is a poem addressing their mother in this collection, I cannot deny her as being their mother or as not being in their lives. This will most likely mean poems on wrestling with influences and maybe giving her a voice as well. This collection is the stepping stone in the journey through motherhood. It has opened the door to the voice of the step-mother, this other-mother.

MOTHER OUTSIDER

Aisilyn has a story to tell you at the top of her lungs even if you're in the middle of talking to someone else because you need to know the information right this very second

backwards words
fill pages in workbooks
she's never finished
as creativity flings
in all directions
creating chaos on the page
as she strings embellished
stories of pirates
children in the park
car rides to nowhere
aided by left-handed drawings
learning but not wanting
to learn or put effort
into listening as her
father teaches and explains
dressing in mismatched
clothes but all her own
design and on her own
terms small frame
with a loud voice
speaks of stories
upon stories
continually thinking
even when food flies from lips
eager to tell and string
lines of poetry and prose
together into something
strangely sweetly distinctly
hers as stillness escapes her
even when tucked under
blankets sleep weaves
dreams of adventure
horror fantasy piled
inside a growing brain
that can hardly contain
all the stories eager for ears

His kids, her kids, *my* kids

I recently began
calling them
my kids in public—
The awkward dance
I perform,
describing my relation
has become exhausting—
They're actually not
my kids—
Even more so,
the looks other parents
give me when revealing
my true identity.

These four girls, small
and growing, didn't come
from *my* womb
or held in *my* arms
in the hospital
after agonizing for hours,
having sweat and tears
wiped from *my* face.

I didn't see them walk
for the first time
while standing with my arms
stretched out to catch them.

I didn't hear their first words—
excitedly encouraging them
to say “mom”—
cherishing their voices.

But why
wouldn't they be my kids?

Aurora asks *me* for help—
flute, math, spelling,
reading the stories she created.

Anjelli seeks out *my* assistance—
hair design, puzzle assembly.

Aisilyn tells *me* stories,

to hold her hand,
and make her smile.

Talia asks *me* if her shoe
is on the right foot,
if she can give *me* a huggie,
squeezing *me* tightly.

They're basically your kids
Angelo tells me, reassuring me
they *are* my kids,
that the memories
of Upper Park
hiking and tripping,
birthday parties—
the awkward small talks with parents—
game nights with a side of
storm outs and laughter,
and all the time
I've spent making dinner,
helping with dessert,
combine into a mother
I'm doing *my* damndest to be.

Maybe I'm Scared

A flood of questions
Began to spring
from the girls' mouths
when we told them
we were engaged.

The light from above the piano
danced in their eyes,
ready to express their thoughts.

Anjelli—the great ball of fire—
sat on the white leather couch,
face scrunched, redder than her hair—
Are you going to have a baby?
I don't want more siblings.

I'm the oldest of three.
I was thrilled
to have a sibling—it meant
I would have a playmate,
someone to talk to,
someone else to love.

She already has three sisters
(attention being her favorite activity),
I can see her objection
at the thought
of another D'Augelli child.

Yet I can't help but
wonder if her feelings
will change
once I am with child.

Aurora is reaching eleven,
Anjelli ten—
they'll be teenagers—
hormones raging,
feeling like the world is against them—
maybe that baby will be
their tie back home,
the only one they confide in
when they think no one else
will listen to their angst,

holding the babe close,
connecting, bonding.

I am afraid, though,
that these girls
won't accept another sibling—
I'm afraid they'll push away,
seeing how much
I love my child—jealousy
growing like the poison oak
I tell them to be careful of—

how will I love them
more than I already do?
How will I show them
more than I already do?
Will I push them away,
focusing on a new child?

Maybe I'm scared

Maybe I'm scared
I've spent all my love
on children I didn't birth
when all I've wanted
is to love the child
who grew inside of me.

Childbearing

*Nelly lifts the crust with elaborate competence
and drapes it into the pie pan.
The tender, practiced movement reminds Virginia
of diapering a baby, and briefly
she feels like a girl witnessing, in awe and fury,
the impenetrable competence of a mother.*

—Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*

1.

*Carissa, will you ever
have a baby?*
Aisilyn's small voice
echoed
off the cars she was moving.

It took me
a moment
to catch my younger-
self's breath,
to tell my spirit
that it was okay
to breathe,
to blink,
to move forward.

How could I tell
this five-year-old child
the pain inside—
I've watched friends
and old school acquaintances
become pregnant and give birth
to beautiful babies.
I've asked that same question
so many times, I cannot
remember—the weight
disappointment has, affected
my heart,
discouraging me to the point
where I've accepted defeat.

Reaching thirty—
an age my teenage past
thought of as death,
death for childbearing—
I'm physically childless.

2.

I'm not childless—
caring for four children
isn't childless.

I didn't know I was
capable of giving love
to children I didn't birth—
capable of giving love
only a mother can give.

3.

Your children are adorable!
I smile and thank people,
quietly silencing
my younger-self's
pain, knowing they aren't
actually my children.

In that silence,
a younger me who thought
she'd have born children
by now—considering they *are*
her own children.

I've given up correcting people—
it's easier than seeing
their faces change—
happy to curious to fake—
I feel diminished,
judged, once
I've revealed the truth—
as if I'm not responsible
to care and love another
human being.
As if I'm not
capable
of being a mother.

4.

Biological parents are
the worst offenders
when I say,
They're my step-kids—
their tone: petty laced
with fake enthusiasm—
a hot poker breaking
through my skin,
searing my womb
while I smile back,
privately mourning
my empty womb later.

I don't know what it's like
to physically bear
a child, but I do know
what it's like to hurt
when my step-daughter
came home
with stitches
from another dog bite
while in the care
of her mother.
To well-up with pride
when they show me
a report card full of A's,
a 1st Place Art Award
or a bright face
when they've mastered
a new gymnastics move.

5.

I am a mother.

I think of my children
before I think of myself.

Something New: A Step-Mom in Uncharted Territory

Mom,
a new mother
figure, more mother
than biological,
slips from the mouths
of four young girls,
freely expressing love.
Are you married yet?

This new mother
showers affection
with hugs and kisses,
encouragement and interest
in everything said
in excited flurry.
Can we paint our nails?

Her eyes light up
as she watches dances,
plays, and magic tricks,
seeing that even the tiniest
has found her voice in the pack.
What are we having for dinner?

Without hesitation
these daughters ask
questions again and again
over and over
and one more time just to be sure
as they not so patiently wait for answers.
What are we having for dinner?

Aurora

1.

Months after I started
dating Angelo, I found
my teenage Bible case.
Inside I found two lists,
one titled “Daughter Names.”

I remembered writing this—
it took me weeks and weeks
to complete, adding names
I found interesting and fitting
for my daughter. “Aurora”
was the first listed.

I remember when
an old co-worker named
her daughter Aurora
and how mad I got—
*That’s what I wanted
to name my daughter.*
I thought to myself.

Every time I heard
her name, I felt betrayed,
like a piece of me
was gone, even though
it never existed.
My dreams of having Aurora
were over before
she was created.

In the moment of finding
that list, I held back tears—
I had many plans, but
the only one that came true
was having a daughter Aurora.
So many daughters I was
going to have and Aurora
is now one of them.

2.

I wanted a family,
an organic one—stemming
from marriage, pregnancy,
house, career—my own
physical creation.

I used to laugh with friends
as we sat in PJs
and cut out images
of weddings and careers,

*Four kids is my limit!
I'm not sure my vagina
could take any more after that!*

I wanted this life
I planned out—
all at twenty-one—
a child's imagination
and creation of what would,
not *could*, come to fruition.

*If my parents did it
when they were that age,
then so will I.*

3.

Now, so many years later,
one of my step-kids,
the oldest, is Aurora.

Spunky—innovative—
first-born—keeper of sisters—
illusion of responsibility—
indecisive.

If I ask, she does
(but only if it's surrounded
by authority over her sisters).

If given a challenge,
she'll throw a fit—
saying, *I can't do it!*
even though she never
tried.

If allowed the opportunity,
she'll entertain you with
stories, songs on her flute,
plays she made up, even
give you a walk-on part
on her new fashion talk show.

She's an emotional child
who takes the brunt of her
younger sister's blame
because she doesn't
want to fight.
She asks constantly if she
can make dinner
or help
to prepare lunch—she
received a cookbook and tools
for Christmas and planned
out all our meals and snacks
for an entire week.

Her gut reaction is to lie—
Is your room clean?
Did you do your homework?—
and then wonders why
her younger siblings don't tell
the truth. Is

she playing her parents?
Maybe. Is she imitating
behaviors she's seen?
Probably. She's a kid.

She wants to be:
a fashion model
a teacher
a gymnast
a rich woman
a chef
a performer

a hair dresser
a designer
an advocate
a good student
a dancer
an actress
(yes, it's different than
a performer)

She wants to do everything
and anything that catches
her heart.

She gives freely—
thinking up new gifts
to make for holidays
and any reason she deems
worthy of gift-giving.

She's a daughter, sister
future wife and mother—
protector, conqueror, leader,
a little uncanny
version of me.

4.

Angelo's words stay with me
(*They're basically your kids*)
and come to me often,
especially in this moment,
holding that yellowed lined
paper with a long list
of names—this Aurora
is mine—I'm helping raise her,
I'm caring for her needs,
she lives in my house
and is part of my family.

This Aurora was named after
the Borealis—mine was a princess.
But I look upon her
and am reminded of myself—

older sister
flute player
desire to play piano
teacher of younger siblings
rebellor—

So many interests (~~like me~~)
So many curiosities (~~like me~~)

This Aurora joins
a long list of namesakes:

Aurora Borealis
Aurora the Sleeping Beauty
Aurora the goddess of dawn
Aurora the big sissy
~~Aurora my (step)~~
Aurora my daughter

A postcard to my former-self

Hello old friend,

I stopped in a part of town
you never heard of yesterday—
one you never imagined
possible, at least not
in this day and age.

(Did you know Bidwell Park
was this beautiful?)

You thought you knew
this town so well!
But I've discovered
something you never expected!

(I mean, how can this
town be so small?
Chico was so big growing up.)

~~Did you ever think
your insecurities would subside?
Did you ever expect to find
adventure in the great
wide somewhere, like the song
you grew up singing?
You'd be amazed
at what I've found!~~

There is a performer
on every street corner—
they look like a version
of the same four people though—

One was wearing mismatched
clothes—polka dot shirt and
stripped skirt—and was
constantly conversing. One
small tiny voice cut in,
still trying to figure out
her lines in the show.
One was ordering the others
around, the director
I suppose. While the last,
with brilliant red hair,
got angry when she didn't
get her way.

I heard them yelling
at each other—
always the same
phrases, but with different intensities.

This is boring!

Everything is BORING!

YOU NEED TO HELP!

BUT THIS IS MINE!

You'll never guess, but
I met someone today.
Yes! A handsome fella
to boot. Don't you
worry, though, he isn't
shifty like all the others
who just want to get
into your pants—
he has kids, too.

Not sure if you
would like him—
he's not clean shaven,
but he's a bass player
with curly brown hair
and blue eyes.
Those eyes...
it's refreshing that he keeps
eye contact
and it's genuine!

Actually, he's much like
the man you prayed for,
now that I'm thinking of it...

Anyway, this town is lovely—
(Why did I ever want
to leave it?)—
all of my days are filled
with activities; never a dull moment!
(Like a soccer mom,
sans soccer.)

Or alone time...

(Did you know that
the bathroom is no longer
a place for peace?)

but I don't mind.

(But part of me does.)

Maybe that's the sleep
deprivation who's talking...

~~I wish you were here.
That's a lie—why did it
take a boy
whom you thought liked
you to get you out,
to get you to have the
illusion of beauty?
I mean, I am thankful
for the swamp of dicks,
losers, and abusers
you waded through
in order to get to the shore
because they lead me,
us, to the man I call
husband, lover, friend,
but there is so much
out there to be conquered—
I miss the images and details
that never came
before your eyes.~~

~~I don't like you now,
yet my knee jerk reaction
is to say *I miss you*.~~

Hope you've taken care
(*even though I know you haven't*).

I've been sitting in front
of this big window,
the sunlight highlighting
the impending doom
of the grey clouds,
watching the birds—
bright and distinguished
against the chance of rain—

fly back and forth,
acrobats I'll never become...

completely forgetting this card...
realizing I don't miss you...

A fridge holds more than food & batteries

This fridge is fascinating.
Old photographs strewn
about on all sides,
magnetized letters and words
spell out notes—
I remember mine
growing up—similar,
yet showed accomplishments
by my siblings,
wore handwritten notes,
my own colored-in
pictures from coloring books,
the occasional photograph,
and artwork my sister created.

I've viewed these voiceless faces
countless moments,
each time finding things
hidden from me.
Angelo's hair, once blonde,
puzzles me as he smiles
back—*have I ever noticed
the red pail behind him before?*

I ponder the memories
that aren't mine—
an anthropologist's aide
in the field of discovery—
children holding grandchildren,
family friends, relatives—
bits and pieces from a past
I never experienced—

a sadness tends
to overcome
my heart, one
of longing, one
of regret, one
of wanting—wondering
where I fit in.

How will I be seen
on the fridge, if ever?
How will these

new memories I'm creating
replace more significant
past ones?
Or will I remain
the spectator,
the outsider,
the filler of the gap?

The Virgin Womb of a Mother

I knew of you
at an early age—
pre-adolescent planning
for a wedding and a visit
from the fowl of creation
filled my diary and conversations
at slumber parties.
My friends and I
placed balls under our
shirts as we played house
and carried baby dolls—
preparing for our mother roles.

At nine years old,
I woke up in a pool
of blood, scared and embarrassed—
then having to go quietly
to my own room,
to get a pair of clean panties.
You, O Womb, smiled
that day for your short
life had begun.

I was too young to realize
your importance in my life.
I was too young to see
through the pain and too
young to think of children.

Nineteen years later,
I'm constantly reminded
of your presence,
your persistence,
your wanting.

I have yet to give you
the opportunity to mold
clay into the makings
of a human
that looks like us—
with blue eyes
and freckles, blonde
hair with curls,
a strong smile

and hidden confidence.

I know your cries
for I feel them deep
within, yearning to carry
a child
just one
before time runs out.

O, my precious Womb,
you look upon children
who aren't yours
and beg me to help
see your dreams come true—
the dreams of the big
family, those children
with red and blonde hair...

the dreams of becoming
a *mother*.

But I am a mother,
Womb, don't you see?
I make sure laundry
has been done,
field questions from young
curious brains—do art
with the intention
of plastering the walls.
I have experienced
late nights
cleaning vomit while
trying not to wake
the ones still sleeping.
The exhaustion from driving
to all activities and scheduling
play dates—forgetting
my own friends and obligations.
And not to mention
the worry of sending them
back to their mom's
out of fear
that they might
get hurt, again.

Mother of the Year

In my small community
of relatives and friends,
I'm regarded as a mother—
I am a mother
to those who matter,
I am a mother
to four young girls.

But what I've noticed,
the bigger community,
the one outside
my home,
doesn't feel the same—
I'm not a mother.
I am a step-mother
and that doesn't count.

Schools, doctors, biological
mothers view me
as an imposter—
the perpetual Milli Vanilli,
mouth moving with words
spoken by a *true* mother,
the CIA agent, set out
to destroy motherhood's agenda—
not once seeing
a woman loving
children not her own.

I hear often:

*You're so brave
for doing this!
You're doing a wonderful
job raising them!
You must be overwhelmed!
I can't imagine doing
what you're doing!*

It's as if I'm about
to get a participation trophy
after the final
game of the season
in a pizza parlor
when all I did was

sit on the bench,
gathering strikeouts
and foul balls.

Do those who judge me
realize I'm just as worn out?
Do they know parenting
isn't a competition or
a pity party?
Do they understand
that even animals
will produce
milk if there's
another animal
who's lost their mother?

Do I need to present
my credentials
to the Board of Mothers
to prove my legitimacy?
Would a resumé be necessary?
They would see:

vomit in my hand
headaches from tantrums
my face when asked a 1000
times for a thing
the amount of time
I take for them
fights about changing
underwear
cleaning rooms
doing homework
being nice.

And in Subsection A,
they'll find a scroll from all the times
I fucked up because
mothering is hard.

May I just bypass
all the formalities?
Motherhood doesn't take,
it gives—
there are no vacations
or paydays—
I'm exhausted
just like every other parent.

If You Could See

After Miller Oberman

Holding Aisilyn in my arms,
feeling her weight
collapse into my chest,
I assess my identity,
as my body becomes uncomfortable
in the hard chair.

I am a mother
to your children—
a positive model of kindness—
yet you paint me as just some woman
who doesn't care.
How could you
deny me motherhood?

You are their biological mother—
but why can't our children
have more than one?

If you could see
their love for me,
my love for them,
would you change your mind?

There is a *little spear*
in your heart,
preventing you from loving the girls.

If you could see
how much of a mother
I am, a mother
they need, maybe
your anger will subside.

Out little spear, if you are hidden here—
your children deserve that.

Sweet (little) Lies

When you're a kid,
Halloween is all about
the *candy*.
The costumes were a close
second, but the candy
was always first.
Seeing those closed plastic
bags full of delicious goodies
on the shelf of every
grocery store and house
days before Halloween
brought fantasies of the booty
we would claim
on All Hallow's Eve—
the mountains of Reese's
Cups, M&Ms (to be used
for bargaining), Milky Ways,
and Snickers—gave
our young lives anticipation
and impatience for October 31st.

Halloween candy in the 90's
went through parents
before they were unwrapped
and greedily consumed—
the fear of drugs
and razor blades concealed
inside the wrapper
was high on their radar—
my siblings and I
waited with watering mouths
for the bag to be handed back
and for our exchanges to begin.

I wasn't sure how
I was going to deal
with Halloween in this
new role—do I give
my kids the candy or not,
do I let them gorge
for one night
and toss the rest?

Angelo and I decided

on neither—
we bagged up their haul
in Ziplock bags and left
them on a shelf for months.

The older two took
candy for friends,
if they were good,
one for their own lunch.
But the younger two
were oblivious to the hands
that rifled through their bags
as they sat in ziplock
on the shelf.

*When are we going
to have our Halloween candy?*

*I'm going to bake
with them, sweetie.*

(total lie)

After meticulously checking
each
individual
piece
of
candy,
my parents took a toll—
a “candy fee”—maybe
baking was my creative form
of the Candy Fee, but
Angelo and I never made
those treats and baked goods
we told them we would—
it was all a distraction,
a ruse, something shiny
to get them to forget
the bag of riches they worked
hard to get, in the cold,
on Halloween.

I had thought of ways
to bake with
their candy, sure,

I just never got around to it.

Instead, the two of us
ate the good pieces—
the Reese's, Butterfingers,
Paydays—and left the remains,
like a filled urn,
on the shelf
in the bedroom
to be thrown away
and never to be
spoken of again.

Until the kids remember
the memory of that night,
how full their bags were
and say, *Hey!*
When are we going to make
those treats you promised?

Transitioning Family

You have been on my mind—
your tiny toes, grasping fingers
anticipating your smile and eyes
with star lights. Star light will reside
in you. Half of my spirit will glide

through you. Half of Dad's,

the same spirit in your sisters.
Your sisters will love you,
showering love through
pictures of you with them,

never separated, always together.

space may separate them from you
but they'll be tethered, tethered

to your heart and their blood.

The School Day Aubade

An anti-lullaby
calls my slumber
to a close.
I hit snooze
in an attempt
to continue my dream
and play “The Death
of a Bachelor” by Panic!
At the Disco on more time.

I’m not a morning person,
but a sleep mourning one—
 I mourn the warmth of your body,
 the innocent positions
 yours made to fit my mold,
 the soft touch of your hand
 sliding around me to hold
 me as I fell asleep.

My eyes look to
the blinds that have
kept the night from peering
at the naked dance
we partook in—
 the way your hand cupped
 my curves
 to pull me close,
 how the bed moved
 to the cadence of our catching breaths,
 the urgency of your lips on my neck,
 how I braced myself with your chest.

How could I ask for more?—

Draping
my arm around you,
knowing that call
will ring again,
I gently place my lips
above the skin of your back, tasting
the death of a bachelor.
Sleepily you say,
“I love you baaaaby”
as my lips smile against you,
not wanting to leave—

*seems so fitting for
happily ever after.*

Your fingers lace mine,
tightening, to keep me close
as my brain tells me

*I'm playing hooky
with the best of the best*

I can hear a *lifetime of laughter*
in your chest as I whisper,
breaking the moment,
allowing reality into fantasy.

Kids must get ready for school...
breakfast must be made...
coffee must brew...

*share one more
drink with me*

smile even though you're sad.

Harvest Has Come

Your eyes, heavy,
as your ears
listen to the song
in my chest,
watch the wheat dance,
out in the east field
through the open window—
harvest has come.

You warm our bed,
the empty space
between my legs.

Open my womb,
my body,
leaving us doubled,
speechless,
with child.

Out by the east field,
harvest sets in,
copper wheat sways
in the autumn wind
as air glides through the window
to his chest, as if
his breath was the wind.

Harvest needs growth,
needs seeds to be planted—
I want to watch children grow.

Harvest has come.

Reflection: Watching Disney Movies with My Kids

1

Growing up, Disney movies were
my go-to stories and entertainment.
Story after story,
princess after princess
had a step-mother.
My children watch
these moves now—
only after I came into the picture.

Watching them as a step-mother,
I see through the story,
seeing the fabricated image,
the false narrative.
These images aren't positive,
rather filled with abuse and envious
women who grasp power,
using it for their gain.

Why would these images be
created when the true image
is a woman putting her all
into children she didn't birth?

2

Lady Tremine—

Oh how you crushed
Cinderella's spirits,
placing your own daughters
higher than her.
You brought her
into your house
only to force manual
labour and isolation—
how did you show
a good example of a
human being to
this young girl?

Mother Gothel—

You took a child
who wasn't yours
 (now, if we stop there
 you and I would be similar,
 maybe the same,
 but that's not where
 your story ends, no).
You took a child,
locked her away
and lied about who she is.
Selfishness winning the game.

Queen Grimhide—
Jealousy won your heart,
so you desired another—
one not so black and cold
to keep your chest warm and fuzzy.
Snow White, so young,
so gorgeous—you
couldn't stand
for the affection she received.
You wanted her dead,
you wanted to be
the forest one of all.
 Is that what a mother
 does to her daughter—
 murder out of jealousy?

3

Those who created
these images, these women,
dammed those who don't
fall into that box—never once
considering other examples
of women who brought children
into their homes and made
them as one of their own.

I'm not some evil,
conniving, power obsessed woman
who thinks her step-daughters
as pawns in a chess game
of affection and attention.

No matter the web
their mother weaves,
these are my children,
I will protect,
nourish, encourage
growth like they were
my own.

I am an imperfect woman
who's taking one day
at a time, feeling
as though she fails
because she says, "no,"
setting boundaries,
being a mother rather than
a friend.

Does that qualify
me as an "evil step-mother"?
Am I on the same level
as Queen Grimhide or Lady Termine?

I'm a rebel—
the one who goes against
the trope Disney and tales
created and perpetuated.
The one who loves
four children unconditionally,
stays up late to make sure
everyone else is taken
care of before her own needs,
holds back laughter
when she's supposed to be
the serious and someone
does something funny.

I am the face of a mother—
exhausted, on the brink
of an emotional breakdown,
spent, worn, haggard,
just trying to hold it tougher
and get her kids fed, clothed,
and on time for shit
when all she wants to do
is get a full night's sleep
and be pampered like a queen.

The Bear and The Woman

The Bear walked alone
through the woods—

The Woman walked alone
through the woods.

The weight of the black
bear's feet crunched under sticks—

the weight of the beauty hung
still among the trees, striking.

The Bear's eyes clung
to The Woman's form,

her legs were powerfully
positioned on the ground,

a stance she knew well,
a protective stance.

She had cubs to protect,
this woman had children

to protect. Her children
exploring the wilderness,

not straying far,
her cubs did the same.

The Woman did not notice
the massive chest behind her,

did not know the strength
and might she had in common

with the black mother bear—
a shared motherhood,

life force, and memories
all residing within the pine needles.

They stood together in this moment—
an invisible veil between them,

unknown shared air
unknown motherly instinct.

The Bear felt her limbs move
as The Woman's aligned

in spirit as one
entity breathing.

In unison, they watched their young
dance and play,

each knowing
they had to protect them

at all costs.

Homemade Roots

1.

The almond trees are blooming now—
mid-February, when they should be sleeping.

It's hard to imagine new life growing
this early into the year.

Chico shouldn't be blooming
this early into the year.

Friends said I would want out, though—
I would want to leave this place,

travel the world, become everything
I ever wanted. I had lofty dreams, yes—

castles and British men housing my bed—
so many opportunities and possibilities.

Why would you stay here?
The voices of high school echoed

through the halls. *I want to leave,*
this small town.

I want to leave
those almond trees,

the college students who never stayed
long enough to establish roots,

all the people from high school,
the life I have always known.

This is my home, though,
looking back, how could I leave?

2.

I didn't think I'd stay,

that my roots couldn't be uprooted.

I wanted to see the world—
roam London, the hills of Scotland.

I wanted to see my belly grow,
several times, while my child developed.

I wanted to see my imaginary life
step into reality and walk into the sunset.

3.

My roots are growing
longer—burrowing into the ground

I walk with daily.
The bridges scattered

through Bidwell Park
lead me home,

again. This is my home.

Reminders

Bad things are going to happen.
—Ellen Bass

You'll tell them
over and over,
to do something so simple,
you'll tell them to clean their room
after tripping over clothes,
stepping on Legos.
To go potty, spell "frog,"
and help them when they're stuck
on a decision as tears
of failure run down
their cheeks.
They're going to lie,
bicker, rough house,
break bowls and plates
in a moment of anger
from the set
you bought in Japan
and kept safe for years.
You'll yell, spank,
say the wrong thing
always at the wrong time,
give them frozen
pizza for dinner,
be too tired to play matching,
even though they've asked
multiple times,
ignore their questions
that seem to be on repeat,
and their incessant talking.
They're going to sneak
out, grab the half-full
vodka bottle in the back
of the cabinet to drink
during a sleepover,
hoping you'll never
find out,
maybe even take the pills
in that pill cabinet
you'll wish they never stoop
low enough to take or steal
money you would have been
happy to give.

They'll go to college
to study Political Science,
maybe even graduate
or get kicked out and crush
your dreams of being a lawyer's
mother. You'll get lectured,
have your mother-
in-law passively criticize
your parenting and the decisions
you've made or/and
complain about her son
immediately after he's walked
out of the house to end
his conversation with her.
You'll marry someone who will
throw your baby to the ground,
break windows, and leave
you with four young children
for eight days
without telling you
or kissing your children
goodbye. You won't
do everything right—
fuck, you'll wish they never
were born, especially when
your once-spouse uses them
against you.
Your daughter will sleep
with men she just met
and never say a word.
You won't know
what to do or how to act
when you have to discipline
or approach a difficult topic.
You'll step on toes,
hit an eye with an elbow,
be told you're not
a real mother
and feel so low
even failures have it better.
You children will
speak of hate,
unfairness, and how mean
you are for telling them
no. But *relax*,
nothing will ever turn

out how you envisioned it
or how someone else did it—
that white picket fence
was built by parents
needing to get away
from children—take
a hammer and try again.

The word that has gripped my identity—the word I am not allowing to define me

I.

I never liked
“step” kids.
The word, with strong
sounds—marking territory,
a hard “t” and “p”
gives authority and hesitation,
an unfeeling word,
cold and distant—
conjuring images of orphans
whose parents have died.

That sound conveys a sense
that this new part
means nothing—these kids
are just baggage along
for the ride into death—
that there’s no love
from the “parent,”
no support, no care.

As if Edward Scissorhands
was the parent—cutting
away
the useless growth,
creating a different masterpiece—
Or The Queen of Hearts
yelling
Off with their heads!

Why does such a harsh
word exist for an extra set of hands?
Or to describe someone
who took on a responsibility
that wasn’t their own?

Children didn’t choose the word—
though they may not have
a better word handy.

II.

I see four young girls everyday—
never once thinking of them
as a “step.”

When I make breakfast,
it’s a step.

What I drive to the bus,
it’s a step. It’s a step
everyday toward acceptance—
but they’re not a step
in my life.

But yet, “step” is
in my name

step-mother

step-parent

Am *I* just a step?

III.

My kids are an addition—
a bonus—
something I never expected
would come my way.

They’re my *bonus* kids—
happy, talkative, eager
to tell me every waking
moment they’ve had
since I saw them last.

They’re small and impressionable
humans, taking knowledge
in any way possible,
even if they’re
not fully aware.

Aurora, Anjelli,
Aisilyn, Talia—
my bonus daughters,
my plus fours,
the source of my joy
and my stress.

They’re a constant reminder:
they’re not burdens.

The hugs they ask for,
the advice they want,
certainly not the love
they give and feel
for me are not a burden.

They're a reminder that I'm
part of this family—
the big family I once grew
up imagining I would have.

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