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Mothering in the Poems of Sharon Olds

The Choice Not to Abuse

Sharon Olds wants to be a good mother. She wants to care for her children in the best way possible, to protect them and see to their needs, physical and psychic. We hear her almost desperate commitment to her children in every poem she writes about them. Olds, or her poetic persona, did not learn as a child from the example of her own mother how to be a good at the job. As she catalogues relentlessly in her poems, hers was an abusive household dominated by an alcoholic father and a weak, complicit mother. Many children in such situations grow up to replicate the patterns they learned and become themselves abusers. Others make the superhuman effort to learn new, healthier ways to relate to children; Sharon Olds is one of these. In her poems she confronts the damage of her past and how it shaped her, and she explores her reconstruction of herself into a fiercely aware and attentive mother.

It is important to say at the outset that the persona of these poems may or may not be reporting on the life of the poet, but it is fair to say also that there is little distance created poetically between the writer and the "I" of the poems. Most are urgently in the first person, and those in the third person are very similar in stance, tone, and subject. Because the voice of the poems seems to be very close to the voice of the poet, I will refer to the woman speaking in the poems as Sharon Olds, at the same time acknowledging that she is a created persona with created parents and children about whom this story is told.

For both the literal and metaphoric explications of her move from abused childhood to healthy adulthood, Olds' chosen site is the physical body in all its observable attributes: large, small, hard, soft, dull, dark, slippery, shiny. She begins with her father's body, then moves to her own, and finally to her children's. Interestingly, she addresses her mother's body infrequently and only late in the poems. A hallmark of her poetic stance is her willingness to look at

even the most private parts of the body and to report what she sees in frank detail and language. The effect is arresting. Critics have variously praised her forthrightness and squirmed about it. One cannot read these poems without confronting one's own attitude toward the physical and sexual as well as toward what a daughter can see and say about a parent, what a woman can say about herself, and what a mother can see and say about a child. Olds gazes openly at her children's bodies. Breaking with the conventions of delicacy and silence around a mother's awareness of children's physicality and sexuality, she tells us what she sees and what it means to her. She may or may not transgress the boundaries of propriety; she may even, as some critics suggest, cross the border between explication and exploitation. Examination of her poems, however, does reveal how Olds represents her relationships, emotions, and psychic development through close observation of the body as a site of meaning and metaphor, and does trace the etiology of her gaze upon her children as an outgrowth of her established pattern of seeing and knowing through the body.

I. The daughter

The poetry explored in this study is contained in Olds's first three volumes, *Satan Says* (1980), *The Dead and the Living* (1984), and *The Gold Cell* (1987:), as well as the fifth volume, *The Wellspring* (1996).[1] Olds has divided each collection into sections that follow similar trajectories, laying out the transformation she is reporting as the persona develops from daughter to sexual woman to mother.

The opening poem of the first book, eponymously titled "Satan Says," sets the stage. The speaker issues a challenge to herself to say the unsayable and a challenge to her readers to stand fast with her. She knows she will break some rules. In the poem the persona is locked in a box where Satan visits her to tempt her to speak.

> Satan
> comes to me in the locked box
> and says, *I'll get you out. Say*
> *My father is a shit.* I say
> my father is a shit and Satan
> laughs and says, *It's opening.*
> *Say your mother is a pimp.*
> My mother is a pimp. Something
> breaks when I say that.
> My spine uncurls in the cedar box. (1980: 3)

Daring to name the evil that has been done to her, she senses release as she begins to extricate herself from the family dynamic. "*Don't you feel better?*" Satan asks as he encourages her to say more, "*Say shit, say death, say fuck the father.*" It is interesting that she posits the act of speaking out as the temptation of the

devil, and therefore evil. Speaking out will have consequences, and she is frightened even as the poem insists on the need to speak of "the pain of the lost past" and to break the oppression of silence. What a therapist would likely read as a healthy expression of emotion arising from past pain, the poet represents as a guilty pleasure and then negates with assertions of love for the abusing parent. "I love him, too ... I say to Satan ... I love but am trying to say what happened to us in the lost past." This reference to "us" suggests that they are all victims, the parents as well as the child, a theme to which she will return in *The Dead and the Living* in poems about her grandfather, also an abuser. Allusions to her mother's role in the abuse are rare and unclear after this initial accusation that she is a "pimp," an accessory to the abuse rather than oblivious to it. Researchers in the field of child abuse have noted that women who were abused as children "disidentify with their own mothers, regardless of whether the perpetrator was the mother or the father.... [They] characterize themselves in their role as mother in very different terms than they use to describe their childhood memories of their own mothers" (Gara, Allen, Herzog, and Woolfolk, 2000: 629). In this light the little Olds offers about her mother corroborates psychosocial findings.

Satan continues to tempt her to utter more words and to come out of the box, but she sees that the air outside is "thick as hot smoke." The constriction of the box, which is the evil she knows, has the security of the familiar; the smoke outside is a damnation that may be worse. Faced with that choice, she confesses the "sudden knowledge of love." Abused children regularly report that they love their parents, the only parents and the only kind of parenting they know. Olds' abused child claims and relies on her love for her parents and remains in the cedar box, fearful, but already "uncurling" by naming the evil that has been done to her.

The poems present an ugly picture of physical and emotional abuse. What is less clear is whether her father's abuse included sexual molestation. There are references to being "under him" that connote subjugation but not necessarily sex. A poem entitled "Night Terrors" opens with "She has so strongly this sense of someone coming after her ... some man so angry, so clever, there is no/ chance of survival" (1980: 11). Although the man is not identified, he is stalking their house, which she sees as "her own mother entered and entered by that man she hated." The tone of dread and sex suggests rape or fear of rape, and in the poem the girl tries to find a way to control the situation: "Every night she tries to think of something that would / get him to spare the children," as if a child could or should have such a power.

The speaker of these poems frequently expresses feelings of guilt for the abuse, as abused children often do. If the abuse is physical, they may report having brought a beating upon themselves, perhaps by not performing a household chore, voicing such thoughts as "If only I hadn't upset him, he wouldn't have hit me;" or "It's my fault he hurt me because I didn't clean my room." Olds' speaker expresses fear she will be sent to Alcatraz because her

"inner badness had spread like ink ... and they had often said/ they would send me there—maybe the very next time I spilled my milk," this passage a child's heartbreaking indictment of self ("Alcatraz" 1987: 28). If the abuse is sexual, the victimized children may believe that it is their fantasies and desires for closeness that cause the adult to molest them, and the abuser may confirm this by invoking secrecy and calling the child a slut or some other pejorative term. Olds describes feeling herself attracted to the father's "massive, meaty" body, and his presence is clearly a sexual one to her as she begins to grow into her own sexuality. There are many references to his genitals in all three volumes: "Your sex stiffening in textbook time" ("The Ideal Father" 1984: 38), "his sad sex dangling on his thigh" ("Fate" 1984: 40). She writes of his breasts, "the polished silk of the hair / running down them delicately like / water" ("My Father's Breasts" 1984: 43). This voice feels complicit in something. Being in the wrong herself, she does not have to condemn him, whose love she needs and desperately desires. In "Fate" she says, "Finally I just gave up and became my father," equating her self with his, her body with his.

Another aspect of the assumption of guilt is a kind of magical thinking in which the abused person takes responsibility for the abuser's actions as a way to feel some control, to feel that one has some power in a powerless position. Echoes of this powerlessness are clear in Olds' poems; echoes of her attempt to retain some power by assuming guilt are also present. In "Love Fossil" (1980: 5), where she has described her father as a dinosaur "made of raw steak ... his jaw dripping weeds and bourbon," she sees herself as a "carnivore" and says, "I did not understand ... my taste for his big dangerous body." It is unlikely that her reference to "taste" indicates that she is seducing him, although it is one of the few overt suggestions that the abuse may include oral sex. Certainly it indicates her need to love him and be loved. Her conflicting feelings of love and betrayal induce guilt as one way to make sense of what is happening. Research on parent-child attachment reports that children whose attachment has been an "anxious" process find it difficult to grow "emotionally independent" (Sroufe, 1996: 189) when compared with those who have developed secure attachments that allow them to explore independently while using the parent as a "mobile source of security who can be referenced across a distance" (Sroufe 178). Olds' continuous reworking of her relationship with her father, and later her mother, bespeaks attachment that, while certainly anxious, is no less essential to her sense of self.

II. The woman

In the next section of each book, the sexual woman section, Olds explores her adolescent and adult sexuality, transferring her gaze from her family members' bodies to her own and to the bodies of her partners. These sections are replete with scenes of copulation and images of genitals. Some of the metaphors are unusual and unsettling, like that of the penis as a tumescent slug ("The Connoisseuse of Slugs" (1984: 51). She begins her sexual explorations

conventionally, however, as a girl peeping through the dressing room at the swimming pool to watch the boys changing clothes ("California Swimming Pool," 1987: 47) or as an adolescent parking and necking with her boyfriend ("First Boyfriend," 1987: 48). The expected images—"your tongue went down my throat"—intensify in this poem: "Your front seat had an overpowering/ male smell, as if the chrome had been / rubbed with jism." The poet then makes the connection with her father: "I / returned to you as if to the breast of my father ... as if I had come / back to a pawnshop to claim what was mine." Her sexuality and personal power are indeed tied up with her father's, and through her adult sexual experiences she will have to demarcate what she will retain from that connection and what she will let go.

The poems in this section of each book describe sex and body parts in the language of slang and make use of puns like "nuts," "balls." Line breaks, too, contribute to a salacious tone; the line frequently breaks after "come," no matter in what sense the verb is used.

The male body is not the only one described. In poems such as "A Woman in Heat Wiping Herself" and "I Cannot Forget the Woman in the Mirror" from *The Gold Cell*, Olds examines her female anatomy. In the latter poem she is

> Backwards and upside down in the twilight, that
> woman on all fours, her head
> dangling and suffused, her lean
> haunches
> ... ... those
> breasts hanging down
> ... ... and her
> tongue long and black as an anteater's
> going toward his body, she was so clearly an
> animal ... (61)

She compares herself to a tiger, "I lay the massive / weight of my body down on you/ like a tiger lying down in gluttony" ("Greed and Aggression," 1987: 56) and her genitals to a "lily with a wound on it" ("It," 1987: 57). There are poems about sex occurring in many positions, during menstruation, and without penetration after childbirth. Gradually, poems of genital and oral sex, of cocks and open legs, begin to give way to poems about the persons with whom she is having sex.

When she recalls the first young man she loved, who died in an accident, the tone changes from the celebration of sexual feeling and freedom. She describes not sex but tenderness and vulnerability, "I was letting it all in ... I was in love and I could take it" ("First Love," 1987: 51). In love she finds something new, something more than she has known so far about sex and the body. "Love," she says, "invents the body that is not an object" ("The Love Object" 1980: 32), a suggestion not just of feminist concern but of awareness that she herself has

objectified the body as she has attempted to learn from it. Olds' frequently anthologized poem, "Sex Without Love," begins, "How do they do it, the ones who make love / without love?" Clearly, Olds has learned something new about sex and the body, or more accurately, about love, a kind of love not conflated with abuse, as she had perceived it in her childhood. "How do they come to the ... still waters, and not love / the one who came there with them" (1984: 57).

In married love this persona finds wonder. Making love after childbirth, she "lay in fear and blood and milk" seeing her husband above her "with the patience of someone who / finds a wounded animal in the woods / and stays with it, not leaving its side / until it is whole, until it can run again" (New Mother" 1984: 53). In poems still heavy with sex and sexual language, she celebrates their love, especially his willingness to love her in spite of the legacy of pain and potential trouble she fears she carries:

> I have always admired your courage. As I see you
> embracing me, in the mirror, I see I am
> my father as a woman, I see you bravely
> embrace him in me, putting your life in his
> hands as mine...
> ... ...
> You are fearless, you
> enter him as a woman ...
> ... ...
> ... you entrust your children to that
> man as a mother, his hands as my hands
> cupped around their tiny heads... .
> —"Poem to My Husband from My Father's Daughter" (1984: 56)

They are her children, too, although she hardly dares to claim them. Attachment will take time. As philosopher Sara Ruddick (1989) has posited, taking on the protective and nurturing characteristics of maternal practice, whether on a conscious or sub-conscious level, is an act of choice, an acceptance of long-term responsibility for the well-being of a child. Olds voices her fear that she will instead replicate the abuse she endured, as so many children of abuse do. Psychosocial studies indicate that most abusers were themselves abused as children and, suggest that fully one-third of all abused children will go on to be abusers (Gara *et al.,* 2000: 627). By now, however, Olds has confronted that example so aggressively that she will certainly be on guard against it. Surely she has been fortunate to choose a partner with whom there is mutual care and respect, but it is not all luck. From the conflicted love and abuse of her childhood, Sharon Olds has come out of the cedar box and said what Satan tempted her to say. This persona has acquired the power to overcome the past and to position herself for healthy relationships as partner and parent. The injured girl will become a fierce and attentive mother.

III. The mother

In the long career of mothering, Olds will turn consistently to the body, her own and each of her children's, to decipher what she knows at a given moment and to discover what she needs to know next. After her well-known poem about birth, "The Language of the Brag" (1980: 44), with its heroic images of sweat, blood, and mucus, and the Young Mother series with such animal metaphors as "her breasts like white wolves' heads" protecting the baby ("Young Mothers II," 1980: 41), Olds' poetic corpus includes few poems about her children as infants and toddlers. The gap between the celebratory performance of giving birth and the quotidian performance of reflective mothering suggests that the persona begins to apprehend and claim the responsibility of mothering only gradually. The poems about the children emerge as they grow into more complex beings, and, one might conclude, as the mother engages in and comes to accept her work. Then, from the distance of her poetic gaze, she can study them and observe the space between them and her. The poems are her analysis of what she sees and what she learns as their mother.

Her gaze on her bathing daughter in "Fish Story" (1980: 46) is an example. She observes the little body moving about in the water, at first comparing it to a fish, "that whole / glazed torso like a fish, / the firm slit a noncommittal fish mouth / smiling neither way." That very original image of the genitals surprises the reader, both in its visual acuity and in its interpretation as "noncommittal," simply a part of the body on its own, neither inviting, enticing, nor repulsing the onlooker. The next image is of the child as a mermaid, a liminal identity between fish and human, which she then equates with the child's growth from fetus to separate human being, "this sleek / stretching child, this glittering eel / who used to be a shrimp in her sea / this woman she once had firmly in her body." Observing the child's now separate body reinforces for the mother the important fact that her children grow beyond her, subtly articulating the conflict between attachment and letting go. The poem's images move steadily toward the mother's realization that this girl is already "the fish that got away." Her conflicted response to this new awareness is an ironic statement about their bodily connection, "the fact she is supposed to forget."

The daughter, Liddy

Liddy is approaching adolescence. Olds' observations here focus on the girl's incipient sexual development and serve as a touchstone for the mother to reflect on her own. "Eggs" introduces the situation.

> My daughter has turned against eggs. Age six
> to nine, she cooked them herself ...
> ... ...
> ... now she
> cries she wants to quit eggs.
> It gets on her hands, it's slimy, and it's hard

to get all the little things out:
puddles of gluten glisten on the counter
with small, curled shapes floating in their
sexual smear. She moans. It is getting
too close. Next birthday she's ten and then
it's open season, no telling when
the bright, crimson dot appears
like the sign on a fertilized yolk. She has carried
all her eggs in the two baskets
woven into her fine side,
but soon they'll be slipping down gently,
sliding. She grips the counter where the raw
whites jump, and the spiral shapes
signal from the glittering gelatine, and she
wails for her life. (1984: 63)

The language and imagery of this poem capture preadolescence, in all its seriousness and hilarity. Behavior that was ordinary and self-sufficient is gone, replaced by high emotion. The "small curled shapes" now seem sexual, and the drama of reproduction plays out in the ensuing images. The "smear" suggests the Pap test to be conducted at the time of the first vaginal exam. "Open season" suggests mating rituals and how vulnerable girls are to sexual predation, a fact the mother knows too well. Her moans prefigure childbirth as well as sex. "It's getting too close," the mother observes—for both of them. In the most poignant image, she sees the girl's maturing ovaries as "two baskets/ woven into her fine side;" from them the eggs will be "slipping down gently," an action that affirms the normalcy of it all, though the girl recoils and, evoking both childbirth again and the presence of an infant, "wails for her life."

Olds watches the girl's changing body. In "Pre-Adolescent in Spring" (1984: 69) the mother sees the girl in images of emerging growth. Her buttocks are like "an unripe apricot," her cool skin like the still-intact "casing of milk-weed pods, her hair "smoking." Around them the mother senses the "pine forest, its hot resin smell like a / smell of sex" and "the flat spears of bulbs ...rising from inside the ground." "Above us the buds are opening," she says, as they hold tight to each other, the girl's body "heavy, / its layers still folded, its fragrance only half unlocked." Coolness gives way to heat-producing growth as ice cubes are "now rapidly / melting in her mouth."

In another poem the girl's pajamas, lying inside out, are likened to the "peeled skin of peaches when you ease the / whole skin off at once" ("Pajamas" 1984: 71). The mother imagines her emerging as from the "skin the caterpillar / ramped out of and left to shrivel."

You can see, there at the center of the bottoms,
the raised cotton seam like the line

down the center of fruit, where the skin first splits
and curls back. You can almost see the hard
halves of her young buttocks, the precise
stem-mark of her sex.

Acutely aware of the girl's sexuality, the mother observes from a distance, a safe and respectful space not preserved in her childhood home. She looks at the pajamas, does not fondle them. In another poem, the girl is baking bread:

... random specks of
yeast in her flesh beginning to heat,
her volume doubling every month now, but still
raw and hard. She slaps the dough and it
crackles under her palm, sleek and
ferocious and still leashed, like her body, no
breasts rising like bubbles of air toward the
surface of the loaf ...

Though her fertility is still contained, the mother feels its imminence. The girl becomes one with the metaphor as in the poem's language *she*, not the dough, is said to be

shaped, glazed, and at any moment goes
into the oven, to turn to that porous
warm substance, and then under the
knife to be sliced for the having, the tasting, and the
giving of life.

—"Bread" (1984: 77)

Fear for Liddy emanates from the knife image, evoking the tearing of first sex as well as of birth.

That fear does not, however, dominate the poet's perceptions. Coming to terms with her daughter's sexuality and eventual separation from her, this mother does not attempt to deny what is happening or to hold the girl back. In "For My Daughter" (1984: 65) she imagines her daughter's first sexual experience. "That night will come." In this opening line the mother asserts her acceptance, continuing,

... Somewhere someone will be
entering you, his body riding
under your white body, dividing
your blood from your skin ...
... ...
... the delicate

threads between your legs curled
like stitches broken. The center of your body
will tear open, as a woman will rip the
seam of her skirt so she can run.

The language of breaking, of stitches broken, the image of an unknown man, evoke the mother's fear, but then she gives the girl agency, "as a *woman* will rip," and purpose, "so *she* can run" [emphasis mine]. The girl will not be an object or victim, as the mother felt herself to have been. The rest of the poem affirms their relative roles:

... It will happen,
and when it happens I will be right here
in bed with your father, as when you learned to read
you would go off and read in your room
as I read in mine, versions of the story
that changes in the telling, the story of the river.

Those critics who castigate Olds for her treatment of her children's bodies fail to see the story of the river being expressed in them. Children change. Mothers change and must learn wisdom. The first poem of Sharon Olds that I encountered, the one that drew me to her work, is an expression of the concessions one must make to gain that wisdom.

35/10

Brushing out my daughter's dark
silken hair before the mirror
I see the grey gleaming on my head,
the silver-haired servant behind her. Why is it
just as we begin to go
they begin to arrive, the fold in my neck
clarifying as the fine bones of her
hips sharpen? As my skin shows
its dry pitting, she opens like a small
pale flower on the tip of a cactus;
as my last chances to bear a child
are falling through my body, the duds among them,
her full purse of eggs, round and
firm as hard-boiled yolks, is about
to snap its clasp. I brush her tangled
fragrant hair at bedtime. It's an old
story—the oldest we have on our planet—
the story of replacement.

Liddy does not open like a rose, that romantic flower, but like the flower of a cactus, surrounded by thorns. We can hear the hiss of the ovary ready to "snap its clasp," a hiss both humorous and ominous, as the mother's ova decline in this unromantic telling. The story, however bittersweet, is the right story, and the mother has drawn clear lines between herself and her daughter, a sign that she will not transgress those boundaries the way her own were.

The son, Gabriel

Where poems of her daughter's growth center around her developing fertility and sexuality and cause the mother to reflect on herself, poems about her son examine his power, which she views as outside herself. Where wisps of humor crept into the daughter poems, laughter erupts easily from the son poems. "Five-Year-Old Boy" from *Satan Says* (1980: 56) is a prime example.

> As he talks, he holds
> a kitchen strainer in his hand. At the end of
> the conversation, the handle is twisted,
> the mesh burst—he looks down at it
> amazed… .
> … … … … … … … … …
> … Nothing is safe
> near this boy. He stands on the porch, peeing
> into the grass, watching a bird
> fly around the house, and ends up
> pissing on the front door. Afterward he
> twangs his penis. Long after
> the last drops fly into the lawn,
> he stands there gently rattling his dick,
> his face full of intelligence,
> his white, curved forehead slightly
> puckered in thought …
> … … … … … … … .
> abstractly he shakes himself
> once more
> and the house collapses
> to the ground behind him.

Olds has contended with male power before, especially the oppressive power of her father. One might expect her to have a guarded response to a son's manifestations of power. Not so here. This mother is charmed by the innocence of Gabriel's strength. Although her image of the twisted strainer suggests the potential for danger implicit in power, Gabe is unmindful of what his strength can do. Although the house does fall down, the colloquial language of the poem works against danger, and the image of the boy focuses on his thoughtfulness.

Olds deepens her exploration of her son's power and growth in poems on the verso pages of the children section of *The Dead and the Living*, paralleled on the recto leaves with the poems about Liddy's developing fertility. Although she is aware of Gabe's sexual body, she is engaged with it more as an outside observer, more mystified by it than moved by the shock of recognition she feels with her daughter. In "Six-Year-Old Boy" (1980: 62) the mother wakes him after a long night's drive and urges him to urinate by the side of the road. She has seen in the back seat that "his hard-on lifts his pajamas like the / earth about the shoot of a bulb." She describes his penis as "hard as a heavy-duty canvas fire-hose / shooting its steel stream," an image of power, but Gabe is "blissful" and "grinning," and half-asleep, the picture of innocence. The mother is aware, however, though the child may not be, of his incipient phallic power as he stands there, "his sex pointing straight ahead, / leading him / as if by the nose / into his life."

In contrast to her preoccupation with Liddy's internal physiology, Olds reports on Gabe's growth in terms of what she can see, visible size and strength. An examination of his pajamas focuses on how fast he is growing out of them, "elongated/ wrists dangling, lean meat / showing between the shirt and the belt." The title, "Size and Sheer Will," (1984: 64) suggests his active intention to get bigger, as do the poem's images.

> If there were a rack to stretch himself, he would
> strap his slight body to it.
> If there were a machine to enter,
> skip the next ten years and be
> sixteen immediately, this boy would
> do it. All day long he cranes his
> neck, like a plant in the dark with a single
> light above it, or a sailor under
> tons of green water, longing
> for the surface, for his rightful life.

His rightful life will include an examination of the violence that can be associated with male power. In "The Killer" (1984: 72) the mother notices that "Whenever there's a lull in the action, my son / sights along his invisible sights and / picks things off," and she sees his pleasure in it: "a hit, you can tell by the flames and / smoke reflected in his glittering eyes." Not threatened but puzzled, the mother reflects, "yet I know this boy, / kind and tender," and she assesses his play as a way of "marking each thing / with the sign of his small ecstatic life." Acknowledging that his play mimics the territoriality associated with war, she refuses the connotation of evil, preferring instead to interpret his ecstasy as a vital enthusiasm. In the next poem about him, however, she addresses his vulnerability in a world where power is tested. They are attending a museum

exhibit of armor, Gabe fascinated, the mother satiated waiting on a bench as he studies each display.

> I see him
> facing a case of shields, fingering
> the sweater over his heart, and then
> for a long time I don't see him, as a mother will
> lose her son in war. I sit
> and think about men. Finally Gabe
> comes back, sated, so fattened with gore
> his eyelids bulge. We exit under the
> huge tumescent jousting irons,
> ... ...
> ... He slips his hand
> lightly in mine, and says *Not one of those*
> *suits is really safe.* But when we
> get to the wide museum steps
> ... ...
> he can't resist,
> and before my eyes, down the stairs,
> over and over, clutching his delicate
> unprotected chest, Gabriel
> dies, and dies.
>
> —"Armor" (1984: 74)

The power here is male (tumescent) and hungry (sated, fattened), and the mother fears it even as her boy can't resist it. As he touches his heart, she sees his vulnerability, knows the limit of her capacity to protect him, however ecstatically he goes toward his life.

Where the daughter poems are infused with worry and anticipation about the private world of the body, the son poems fill with humor, even those concerned that he grow into goodness and be safe. Often quoted and hilarious, "Rite of Passage" (1984: 66) encapsulates the mother's understanding of this child of a different sex—and celebrates it.

> As the guests arrive at my son's party
> they gather in the living room—
> short men, men in first grade
> with smooth jaws and chins.
> Hands in pockets, they stand around
> jostling, jockeying for place, small fights
> breaking out and calming. One says to another
> How old are you? Six? I'm seven. So?
> They eye each other, seeing themselves

tiny in the other's pupils. They clear their
throats a lot, a room of small bankers,
they fold their arms and frown. I could beat you
up, a seven says to a six,
the dark cake, round and heavy as a
turret, behind them on the table. My son,
freckles like specks of nutmeg on his cheeks,
... ...
... speaks up as a host
for the sake of the group.
We could easily kill a two-year-old,
he says in his clear voice. The other
men agree, they clear their throats
like Generals, they relax and get down to
laying war, celebrating my son's life.

The threat is there, all the potential future violence mirrored in the turret-cake and the dominance over a two-year-old, all the economic power of small bankers, but in the end the mother is chuckling, celebrating her boy, and her readers laugh in recognition of the inscrutable dynamics of it all.

Celebration becomes tempered with a more thoughtful approach to the son's development as he enters adolescence. It isn't until *The Wellspring* that the poems begin to examine his maturation, but these poems do not refer to his powers of reproduction the way the poems about Liddy do. They draw on what the mother can see, and they frequently refer to his clothing—his outgrown jeans, a jacket with big shoulders, the polo shirts he stops wearing at age twelve. He also lets her know, in lines that speak to the conversations they must have in that family, what she doesn't understand about him and about boys in general:

You think that boys have all the power,
he says, but it's the girls who let you
know if the one you like will say yes,
and then, if you're lucky, you ask her.
—"The Transformed Boy" (1997: 63)

It's not just sex and reproduction that concerns her now but the gender into which he is growing. As she has claimed agency for Liddy as a sexual being, we see from this wisp of conversation that she has attempted to talk with Gabe about his privileged status in socially constructed gender roles, perhaps to ameliorate his potential for the patriarchal/phallic power she has accepted with humor so far.

Now the humor turns serious: "I know I must get ready, / get over my fear of men now my son / is going to be one" ("My Son the Man" 1997: 67). Until

now Olds has not equated her son with her father in these poems, but as his body gives evidence of his approaching manhood, she cannot avoid it. All along she has been amused by her son's curiosity, touched by his compassion, and perhaps even surprised by his innocence. It is vitally important to her that she find goodness in her children, the daughter in whom she has seen the "Sign of Saturn" (1984: 73), the god who ate his children whom she associates with her father; and the son who belongs to a gender she has cause to fear, even though she has reported in other poems a better kind of manhood in her husband.

In the poems about her children Olds lays out a kind of parenting she did not receive, nor, apparently, did her father, whose own father seems to have set the pattern for cruelty and abuse. The poems in *Satan Says*, first speaking out against her father's abuse, do not show awareness of the family history of abuse. Several in *The Dead and the Living* do, among them "The Guild" (1984: 17), "The Eye" (1984: 19), and "Of All the Dead That Have Come to Me, This Once" (1984: 21). Olds calls the grandfather a "brutal man" saying, "He taught my father/ how to do what he did to me" and speaks of her father as his "apprentice ... that young man/ not yet cruel ... who would pass his master in cruelty and oblivion" (1984: 17). It is no wonder that with a history such as hers this woman feared what she could do to children. It *is* a wonder that she, or any abused child, has taught herself a very different kind of parenting—and love—from what she learned at home.

Bathing the Newborn

I love with an almost fearful love
to remember the first baths I gave him—
... ...
... When I got him too soapy he'd
slide in my grip ... but I'd hold him not too tight,
I felt I was good for him,
I'd tell him about his wonderful body
... ...
... I love that time
when you croon and croon to them, you can see
the calm slowly entering them, you can
sense it in your clasping hand,
the little spine relaxing against
the muscle of your forearm, you feel the fear
leaving their bodies. (1997: 45)

Both maternal love and love for her husband are expressed in the poems. From earlier ones in which she is surprised that he loves her to the later poems in *The Wellspring*, deeply moving poems about conjugal love reflect a progres-

sion through knowledge and commitment to mature love. As is her mode, Olds expresses connection through the "body university," describing her sexual life with her husband in explicit visual and tactile terms. Her metaphors are arresting as always: They are "dragonflies / in the sun, 100 degrees at noon, / the ends of their abdomens stuck together" ("Last Night" 1997: 86). Sex and the body are as self-defining to this persona as ever, its wellspring. Seeking understanding, she says about her genitals, "Central inside me this one I am and am not," and asks, "Is it my soul in there?" ("Am and Am Not" 1997: 87). Sex, she says, "became the deep spring of my life" ("The Source" 1997: 33). Sex and birth have been connected throughout these volumes, as "central meanings" to which she must be "faithful" ("Prayer" 1980: 72):

> that is the center of life, that moment when the
> juiced bluish sphere of the baby is
> sliding between two worlds,
> wet, like sex, it *is* sex
> —"The Moment the Two Worlds Meet" (1987: 67)

The central meanings are not just genital. With her children and husband she has learned love. In Part Four of *The Wellspring*, in the poems about her husband, she slows her pace from the intensity of the dragonfly poem and focuses more on their relationship. "This Hour" (79) begins, "We could never really say what it is like,/ this hour of drinking wine together/ on a hot summer night" and alludes to the things they talk about—their son at camp, their fathers' deaths. The poem moves slowly through sleepiness and tears as if to savor the sense of their shared life; it ends not on the physicality of sex; rather, it knows that they will *make love*, a significant change of language, and it culminates in that knowledge.

> Yes, we know we will make love, but we're
> not getting ready to make love,
> nor are we getting over making love,
> love is simply our element,
> it is the summer night, we are in it.

For a woman who reported witnessing no such communion between her parents, to have this love must surely be a treasure. She has learned this love along with the love of children. The final poem of *The Wellspring* acknowledges yet another dimension of their relationship:

> In the middle of the night, when we get up
> after making love, we look at each other in
> complete friendship, we know so fully

what the other has been doing... .
... ...
...we are bound to each other
with huge invisible threads ... surely this
is the most blessed time of my life ...
("True Love" 1997: 88)

Love is friendship, is a bond, is sexual connection, is maternal connection, is blessed. From the raw material of childhood abuse, Sharon Olds has constructed an adult, mothering life through experience, desire, and a determined act of choice.

[1]The fourth, *The Father* (1992), focuses on the father's death from cancer and is not examined here, nor is the latest, *Blood, Tin, Straw* (1999).

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