

The title poem, “my mother did not tell stories,” concludes the volume’s first section and offers a fresh perspective on gender roles. The mother gives “advice” to her children, such as “don’t ask your brother to dry the dishes.” While the implied meaning is that this household chore should be delegated to a female, the speaker challenges this assumption. The speaker also sympathetically reveals her mother’s struggle with the daily demands of motherhood and marriage, as seen when her mother keeps “running away.”

The second section, “River Valley Poems,” broadens the focus on motherhood to include nature and community. In “After-Earth: second spring,” for example, the speaker recalls losing property to the rising river and ponders the different seasons: “winter” was a “friend” and “spring” was “a dangerous time.” Yet, by the end of May, the speaker’s cabin is rebuilt by the river and the earth is fecund like a pregnant body: “the returned earth is placental.”

The last section, “Drawing Circles,” returns to the themes of motherhood, marriage, nature, and family. In “Translating the Bush,” the speaker’s dream of pregnancy evokes her grandmother’s life in a “cabin-cocoon on the riverbank.” She marvels at her grandmother’s ability to balance her numerous daily chores with helping women with “swollen white bellies.” The speaker also reflects upon her daughter’s activities, such as “chasing toads and butterflies,” as the women in the poem merge into the different elements of earth.

By the concluding poem, “How to Look Good Naked,” Kruk adopts a lighter, more humorous approach. As she laments the numerous ways she has tried to lose weight through various workout and diet methods, the speaker notes that her scars and stretch marks from pregnancy should be celebrated not hidden. The speaker states that women’s post-pregnancy bodies are strong “mappings” of where “babies were made” and “fathers were born.” She calls for women to rise “like a birch,” so they may stand in awe of their bodies’ strength. This last poem is a powerful ending that honours the maternal body.

Noble Orphan: Poems

Andrea Nicki.

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REVIEWED BY ANNE BURKE

A self-professed “orphan” and traitor who abandons her “unlivable” family is transformed as the family hero in the title poem of *Noble Orphan*, the

second collection of poems by Andrea Nicki. In the first section, “Teaching ESL,” the speaker’s role as a language instructor is contextualized as surrogate “cross-cultural” mother—“difficult and demoralizing.” Conflicts and challenges characterize the poems in this section, where the sibilance of “sounds / sea” and “seashell” form part of an accented voice.

In the second section, “Homeless Neighbour,” the speaker associates animal bites with a human bite, the sign of “a personality conflict.” She experiences adaptations in nature and camouflage which resonate in “dull, bureaucratic environments.” Many of the poems in this section are work-centred, written from the point of view of a bus driver, a radio announcer, and other workers.

The third section, “Noble Orphan,” relies in part on documents. Here the speaker observes the gap between scientific measuring devices in a laboratory and the soul, a metaphor for bodily abuse and the realignment of her spirit. She contemplates her own trauma, unanticipated survival, and the use of pharmaceuticals in treating mental health problems, which culminates in a found poem composed of a diagnostic questionnaire.

The poem “Cousins” recollects fragments of family stories amid newspaper and academic articles containing research on sex offenders. The language is specific and analytical, reinforced by an incantatory refrain: “We are the black sheep / We are the outcasts / We are the orphaned / We are part of the whole story.” “Mother’s Day” invokes an ancient conjuring power to raise the speaker’s mother from the dead, but “she always preferred me / silent, stillborn.” Hence, to send flowers would be “like sending / flowers to my grave.” Instead, the speaker collects flowers from the garden, dropping a penny in a pond, to wash away “all bitterness and hurt.” She also embraces the healing potential of goddesses, female prayer, and prayer beads.

In the fourth and final section, “Sufi Heat Rose,” the speaker is soothed by poetry, the holding of hands, interconnectedness, a peacock eye, naked cherubs, and sacred song. Finally, she appreciates a lesbian, matriarchal order, her persona as a radical, young Sappho translating a horrific catalogue, punctuated by instances of eco-feminist spirituality.