

BETH ANN FENNELLY

Latching On, Falling Off

I. When She Takes My Body into Her Body

She comes to me squirming in her father's arms,
gumming her fingers, her blanket, or rooting
on his neck, thrashing her mouth from side to side
to raise a nipple among his beard hairs. My shirt sprouts
two dark eyes; for three weeks she's been outside me,
and I cry milk to hear my baby—any baby—cry.

In the night, she smells me. From her bassinet
she wakes with a squall, her mouth impossibly huge,
her tongue aquiver with anger the baby book says
she doesn't have, aquiver like the clapper of a bell.
Her passion I wasn't prepared for, her need
naked as a sturgeon with a rippling, red gill.

Who named this *letdown*, this tingling upswing?
A valve twists, the thin opalescence spurts past the gate,
then comes the hindcream to make my baby creamyfat.
I fumble with one hand at my bra, offer the target
of my darkened nipple, with the other hand steady
her too-heavy head. She clamps on, the wailing ceases.

No one ever mentioned she's out for blood. I wince
as she tugs milk from ducts all the way to my armpits.

It hurts like when an angry sister plaits your hair.
 It hurts like that, and like that you desire it.
 Soon, soon—I am listening—she swallows,
 and a layer of pain kicks free like a blanket.

Tethered, my womb spasms, then, lower, something shivers.
 Pleasure piggybacks the pain, though it, too,
 isn't mentioned, not to the child, drunk and splayed
 like a hobo, not to the sleeping husband, innocent beside us.
 Let me get it right so I remember: Once, I bared my chest
 and found an animal. Once, I was delicious.

II. First Night Away from Claire

I forget to pack my breast pump,
 a novelty not in any novelty shop
 here at the beach, just snorkel tubes,
 shark teeth, coconut-shell bikini tops.

Should we drive back? I'm near-drunk
 from my first beer in months. We've got
 a babysitter, a hotel room, and on the horizon
 a meteor shower promised. We've planned
 slow sex, sky watch, long sleep.
 His hand feels good low on my back,
 tracing my lizard tattoo. And he can help—
 he's had quick sips before—so we stay,
 rubbing tongues, butter-dripping shrimp.

Later, he tries tamely, but it's not sexy,
 not at all—he'd need to suck a glassful
 from each breast. The baby's so much better.
 He rests. *It's hot*, he says, *and sweet*.
 We're tired. We fall asleep.
 I wake predawn from pain.

Those meteors we were too tired to watch—
 it will be thirty years
 before they pass this way again.

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III. After Weaning, My Breasts Resume Their Lives as Glamour Girls

Initially hesitant, yes,
but once called into duty,
they never looked back.

Models-turned-spokeswomen,
they never dreamed they'd have so much to say.
They swelled with purpose,

mastered that underwater tongue,
translating the baby's long-vowel cries
and oozing their answer,

tidal, undeniable, fulfilled.
For a year, they let the child draw forth
that starry river, as my friend Ann has termed it—

then, it was time, stopped the flow.
They are dry now, smaller, tidy, my nipples again
the lighter, more fetching pink.

The bras ugly as Ace bandages,
thick-strapped, trap-doored,
too busy for beauty—

and the cotton pads lining them
until damp, then yeasting in the hamper—
all have been washed and stored away.

So I'm thinking of how,
when World War II had ended,
the factory-working wives

were fired, sent home
to cook for returning soldier husbands
when my husband enters the bedroom—

Aren't you glad? he asks, glad,
watching me unwrap bras
tissue-thin and decorative

from the tissue of my old life,
 watching, worshipfully, the breasts resettle
 as I fasten his red favorite-

Aren't you glad? He's walking
 toward them, addressing them, it seems—
 but, Darling, they can't answer,

poured back into their old mold,
 muffled beneath these lovely laces,
 relearning how it feels, seen and not heard.

IV. It Was a Strange Country

where I lived with my daughter while I fed her
 from my body. It was a small country, an island for two,
 and there were things we couldn't bring with us,
 like her father. He watched from the far shore,
 well meaning, useless. Sometimes I asked
 for a glass of water, so he had something to give.

The weather there was overcast, volatile.
 We were tied to the tides of whimper and milk,
 the flotsam of spit-up, warm and clotted,
 on my neck, my thigh. Strange: I rarely minded,
 I liked the yogurt smell trapped beneath her chinfolts.
 How soon her breath bloomed sweet again.

She napped, my ducts refilled
 like veins of gold that throb though lodged in rock.
 When she woke, we amped up our body language.
 How many hours did she kiss one breast or the other?
 I told her things. She tugged my bottom lip,
 like sounds were coins beneath my fascinating tongue.

We didn't get many tourists, much news—
 behind the closed curtains, rocking in the chair,
 the world was a rumor all summer. All autumn.
 All winter, in which she sickened, sucked for comfort,
 a cord of snot between her nose, my breast.

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Her small pillows of breath. We slept there, single-bodied.

Then came spring and her milk teeth and her bones
longer in my lap, her feet dangling, and, rapt,
she watched me eat, scholar of sandwiches and water.
Well, I knew the signs. I held her tight, I waded out,
I swam us away from that country, swam us back
to my husband pacing the shore, yelling and waving,

in his man fists, baby spoons that flashed, cupping suns.
It was a strange country that we returned to, separately—
strange, but not for long. Soon, the milk stops
simmering and the child forgets the mother's taste,
so the motherland recedes on the horizon,
a kindness—we return to it only at death.