Of Silence and Idolatry

I run my hands over the perfect, smooth slipping body of my child. I hover over the toilet when she is sick, and full of pity for the small bowed back, I watch the shit come out of my sick child's bent and laboring body. Then I know the depth of my idolatry.

This is a memory I have of my daughter when she was two in the upstairs bathroom on 9th Street, the bathroom where the toilet was raised above the floor to retrofit the plumbing. The next-to-last house I lived in with John, when our three children were tiny. The house in California with apricots, plums, blackberries, strawberries, figs, lemons—with impatiens, begonias, calendulas, ranunculus—and the tree I thought of as paradise, a huge grapefruit tree by the street on which buds, white flowers, green and golden fruit all coexisted, in a simultaneous birthing and fruiting and blossoming. The house we brought our son to as a newborn, where the girls sat on the front curb with grandma and grandpa, holding their new stuffed lambs, waiting for the car to pull up and their brother so beautifully tanned with jaundice to be handed gingerly to them. A few days later, on a bright June morning, I laid Lucas on the bureau by the window, naked, soaking up sun for his jaundice, and Jessica on the bed bumped her hand and started to cry, and Pascale on the stairs bumped her foot and started to cry, then Lucas started to cry, and there they were, scattered, bawling, and there I was, outnumbered.

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Loving them so, I've never written much about them, my three children with John, nor written much about him. And that is the door that remains to be opened. *Why? Why go there? Why, when there is so much pain, and so many things you still can't talk about?*—To make my children part of my book. Children love to hear their mother praise them, and so here I will conjure them over and over, my

daughter daughter son

whose lives are the music in my blood. Whose lives my leaving broke in two, though when I left I didn't mean to leave them.

So when you fell in love that spring with Peter, suddenly and forever, you thought Virginia would be the same as California, where no one got blamed, everyone divorced, and everyone shared custody. Well. Remember the day the lawyer said, "Once a woman falls off the pedestal in Virginia, she's in the mud"? Remember how happy she sounded, even though you'd heard she was a feminist and were planning to hire her? Watching her smirk, you drove the sharp end of a paperclip into the palm of your hand, over and over and over. That's when you knew you would not fight, would not start taking the children to church in dresses and little suits, sitting up front like that lawyer said you'd have to. Not try to make John look bad, not drag the children to court and make them choose between you. —A voice comes in me: *Bitch, remember the 4 p.m. you signed the separation agreement, your hand lowered to the heavy legal paper, and though you swore you would die instead you agreed not to see them from summer to Hallowe'en, from Hallowe'en to Christmas, from Christmas to Easter, from Easter to summer? Remember the moment he drove them out of sight and they knelt on the back seat looking out the window, and you stood on the porch next to the apricot tree and did not even die, and turned and went inside, and they were moving back to California?*

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I don't understand happiness or how you ever know. Our marriage was probably ending for more than a decade. But most of the time we got along just fine. Most of the time we lived the way you do, moment to moment, day to day—

I take hamburger from the freezer, tonight I'm going to make spaghetti sauce. I've waited too late, again; why can't I ever take it out in time for it to thaw? But I'm clever with the spatula, cooking it over low heat, scraping it off as it warms and softens. The children have their deep bottom drawer—an idea I got from Ellen. They can keep their toys and junk right here beside me in the kitchen, and play around my feet, which sometimes they do peacefully. Or let's say I'm constantly interrupted, Pascale and Jessica both want the Holly Hobby coloring book, Lucas's shirt is wet with juice, someone has skinned a knee, someone needs a nap, surely needs a diaper change—and the kittens are mewing to come inside, the mother cat needs food, Pascale wants to tell me in endless detail the plot of "The Aristocats," her favorite movie. That's the late afternoon. And the refrigerator is on the back porch, so cooking means walking back and forth, get the meat, the onions, the tomatoes, the bread and butter and jam for a pre-dinner snack for Jessica, who's starving. Or cheerios for Lucas, in his high chair. Then everyone needs milk, in a Tommy Tippee cup or bottle.

Day by day, those years, I thought I could live with John forever. Jackie said, "Do you know how lucky you are, to have such a great family guy?" So I don't want to tell you, don't want you to know, how I failed him in my thoughts, how I failed him in my deeds, lay beside him night after night in my old lady

underpants and cotton flowered granny gown dreading the day the children would grow and we'd have nothing to talk about. Once I told him, "This is practice for when I'm dead," and for some reason I thought of it as a friendly thing to say, an acknowledgment: "I'm not here, really, you move across the ghost of me."

But there is happiness in the daily round from sink to stove to table, from bath to garden to kindergarten, the long delirium of immersion, in service to their sweet bodies. Picking up and doing laundry, home haircuts, we are so poor we barter what we can, do yard work for rent, rejoice at the relatives' cast-off clothes and furniture. John scrounges the trash, that's how we get our ironing board, a bronze floor lamp, a Craftsman chair. In the garage we find—and keep—a previous tenant's enormous walnut picture frame, and I buy a cheap print of a Right Whale that reminds me of Moby-Dick. —What do the children wear? *Pascale likes pants, she climbs trees, John takes her to see "The Wild Child" and for months she becomes l'enfant sauvage, scampers naked in the macadamia nut tree and on the roofs of neighbors' houses. Jessica is the prairie girl in little shawls and dresses, she wears hats and strings beads on tiny wires, making bracelets, necklaces. Lucas stuffs his tummy into his patched green jeans, his feet into Zachary's cowboy boots. John ties a bandanna around Lucas's neck and sits him on the motorcycle he bought for $5, that runs only once, and goes "vroom vroom" and makes Lucas laugh. One year I am on a seamstress jag and I make the girls nightgowns, sweaters; the nightgowns are stiff and soon too small, and the sweaters get bigger every time I wash them.* —What do the children do? *Well, for one thing, we garden. We walk up to the plant store, and that in itself takes forever, me pushing the buggy with someone skipping alongside and someone riding behind. We walk around the aisles of plants looking at the flowers and reading off names on the little six-packs. Zinnias, cosmos, calendulas, Johnny jump-ups, nasturtiums. Snapdragons that open wide when you squeeze their hinges and clamp their jaws on the children's fingers. Ranunculus bulbs, my favorite, because I keep thinking this time they will flower abundantly, and sometimes they nearly do, but then because the soil wants to revert to desert no matter how much I water, no matter how much I add loam and compost, they grow peaked and wizened. Then we walk home and plant things. I can garden while they nap or they can help me, looking for sowbugs and snails, picking strawberries when they're ripe, or blackberries when they poke through the neighbors' fence, that's fair, or apricots big as tennis balls.* —What do the children eat? *Pumpkin bread. Milk, though they hate powdered milk, which John makes them drink because it is cheaper. Apple juice, applesauce, apple pie. Hamburgers, meatloaf, all the usual things. Bananas, avocados. Big Macs for Pascale, raspberries for Jessica, and for Lucas, his own invention, triple-butter sandwiches. Only a few things they all agree on: lasagna, spaghetti, homemade doughnuts, fudge ripple ice cream.*

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This is my idolatry. I know every inch of their bodies. Which ones vomit easily,

which one fights it. Whose diaper rash responds to Desenex, whose to Caldesene powder, whose to aloe vera. Who nearly drowns, who gets croup, who gets scarlet fever. Who has ticks one day on the genitals and deep in the folds of the ear. Who has ringworm, constipation, nightmares of wolves and schoolrooms, a herniated navel... I know their feet pushing off against my belt, their gums then teeth at my nipples, the swivel of their downy sticky heads, their pee on my jeans and slobber down my shirt, how they pack dirt and baby food in the fat folds of their chins. I know their sweet heft: so many years carrying babies, always on the right hip, that my ribcage finally pivots, the bones poke out, and I am sure I am dying of cancer. I know them with my prayers and all ten fingers. God, I know my children the way you know your breath, your voice, the water in your eyes.

Nearly twenty years ago, when I was visiting them in California, the kids and I stood talking to their neighbour, who said, "Ah yes, I remember you now. You are the woman who never stopped touching her children."

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Now they're grown, they are strong and beautiful. *And John?*—I used to dream sometimes that I was still married to him but had been having an affair with Peter for years, and in my dream I would think, This is wrong, Peter is the one I should be married to, I have to leave John. Last night I dreamed we made love, John and I, though in my dream I didn't want to dream it, I wanted it to be Peter, but John kept saying, No, *me*. So we did. And now I understand it. When you draw a circle of love you can't just forever leave somebody outside.

Today the rain has stopped. A cloudy sun comes out behind the trees, here where I sit, once again in California. Thirty-four years ago we honeymooned, John and I, in Inverness, just across Tomales Bay from where I spend these days at Point Reyes Station. The people at the hotel loaned us their little sailboat, we assured them we could sail—and we could, sort of. When we ran aground we were so full of guilt, afraid we'd hurt the boat, we gingerly lifted it off the rocks to check the paint for scratches, but we hadn't done a bit of damage, and soon, in the sun with a breeze behind us, we were asail again.

Such anguish, the seven years I did not live with my children. Those comings and goings, letters and cards and sticker books and stickers, the stories read over the telephone. The angry hugs that hurt. Nights of sobbing, rigid, before parting. Then songs all the way to the airport, "Early Morning Rain," "The Water Is Wide," "Sleep, Baby, Sleep," "Hush, My Honey," "The Street Where You Live," and all the rest, as if to fill them for my absence. My sweet children, till you lived with me again, those were our history.

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And I sat in my office that Monday in Virginia, my suitcase hidden behind the door. I had cooked eggs and toasted bread, kissed the children, John had driven me to the office as he did every morning. A few months later Karen brought me an article, meaning to be kind, about mothers who have divorced and lost their children. — Why? Why did you do it? Why did one foot follow another and your body consent not to be home when they came home, not to be there with your arms, why did you leave them that first night, bitch, bitch, why did you let them rock and cry and how do you think they could sleep and wake without you? *Because I could not sleep or eat, having found Peter, the one love strong as birth? Because John refused to leave and he was bigger, he could pick me up and put me outside, he could lock the door, I couldn't win? Because I had Peter and John had nobody? Truth is, because I didn't think I'd lose them, I thought we'd live close by and see each other daily, they'd be mine because I was their mother, John would agree to that, and the kids would sleep three nights with me, three nights with him, we'd be one of those loose California families. John? Who was John? Not my enemy.*

"All we can be sure of is that at our most subjective we are universal; all we can be sure of is the profound flow of our living tides of meaning," Muriel Rukeyser writes in *The Life of Poetry*. But a mother who loses her children—a mother who loses her children—who bears them and loves them and cares for them and then lets the maw of the world yawn wide so that when they look they cannot find her—I'm not sure such a woman's subjectivity can be universal. For many years, I felt: If the world would stone such a creature, would leave her to die by the road, I would not blame it.

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How you want them sleeping that small, gummed sleep, working their mouths a little, making those tiny smacking sounds like they did at the nipple when they were babies. Then waking up happy or grouchy or any old way, rubbing the sleep from the corners of their eyes. You want them in footed pajamas, in down jackets, Nikes, boxer shorts, ripped jeans, body piercings, you name it, their lanky or curving flesh crossing your doorsill, flopped at your table. Even their music, turned up loud. Their broken-down jeeps in your driveway, their Great Dane puppies yapping in the mudbath devastation of your yard.

Those first weeks after birth, I'd hold my babies in the bath. Their head would rest on my breast, and their feet would reach to my pubic bone. My heart would beat into every bit of their bodies. I'd lay my hands upon them, gently, lightly, cradling the tiny butts and legs, and spread a wrung washcloth over them to keep their little backs warm.

Note to "*Blesser*" and "Of Trinket, of Mary":

These poems are part of a sequence called "The Trinket Poems," which I wrote after acting the part of Trinket Dugan in "The Mutilated," a little-known one-act play by Tennessee Williams which is part of a double bill called *The Slapstick Tragedy*. The paragraph below is from the preface to "The Trinket Poems," written by the play's director, Michele Cuomo.

In April 2002 I directed a production of *The Slapstick Tragedy* at the University of Mississippi, featuring Ann Fisher-Wirth as Trinket Dugan in "The Mutilated." Trinket's left breast has been removed. Her mutilation leaves her heart close to the surface. Celeste, her shoplifting prostitute companion, "exposes" Trinket's mutilation, not only by scratching it on the bathroom wall, but also by slowly opening her heart. Trinket at first seeks to salve her wound with "the Christmas gift of a lover." In our production, Trinket adorns herself with Mardi Gras beads and stretches them out to her drunken sailor, offering herself as a sacrifice in a Dionysian ritual; she returns to the spirit of the original Mardi Gras carnival, a valediction to *carne*, offering herself to indulge the sailor's desire to rend her further. This ritual, however, is a failure, as the sailor and Trinket tear away from each other when Celeste's screams interrupt them, and the sailor falls asleep. Trinket is then stirred by maternal longings, and mourns her missing breast for its ability to nourish. She transfers her desire back to the maternal, and feeds and comforts the starving, childlike Celeste. She passes wine and wafer to Celeste, and in that ritual of the mass, her room at the Silver Dollar Hotel becomes a sacred space where Trinket and Celeste can commune with the divine.

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