

THE FUSS AND THE FURY

The Devin-poems

Marion Cohen

“...Though with the smile of his dear face he draws mother’s
yearning heart to him, yet his little cries over tiny troubles
weave the double bond of pity and love...”

-- “Baby’s Way”, Rabindranath Tagore

“Babies give me a feeling which I wish would last...”

-- letter (from me) to Madeleine Bass

BRET AT SIX REMEMBERS MY WOMB

It was boring.

He couldn't wait to get out.

But then, once he did, he was sorry.

It wasn't like he'd thought.

He'd thought he'd just get out of the bag, and then be able to go exploring in my ribs 'n' brains 'n' stuff.

He'd though he'd get closer to me.

Not further away.

THE FURY OF MATERNITY

Out of the violence of labor
our of wrenchings, clenchings
out of the bones and the metal
out of words, out of rhythm, our of respect
out of the violence of Big Mama
tumbles a single, simple Dewdrop.

Mommy's beauty
with a bubble of a head
a bauble of a toe
belly like a puddle
limbs like tall grass

squeaks, grunts, little kitten-y notes
vocal chords fashioned with music-box precision
teeny mouth licking its chops, again and again
until it begins to panick, realizing it really would rather go back to eating

Dewdrop, Rose Petal, Binky, Beauty
Mommy's Little Beauty
Mommy's Little Truth.

Not only does every labor imply a baby.
But every baby implies a labor.

THE FURY OF INFANCY

Finding himself here he might as well stare
at two-inch outlines of one-inch shapes
or try not to stare at all.
Finding himself here he might as well turn
his floating head towards anything red
anything white, anything bright, anything here or there.
Finding himself here he might as well dangle
his feet into squares, circles, spirals
reach out his arms for voices, hums.
Finding himself hear-
ing he might as well listen.
Finding himself seeing he might as well look.
Finding himself here he might as well stay here.
Finding himself here he might as well.

INSOMNIA IMMEDIATELY POST-PARTUM

How can I possibly
when each time I do
I dream the nurse brings in the baby?
Or my other children?
Or my husband?
How can I possibly
when each time I do
life-sized cardboard pictures of yellow Wildthings torment me?
and every object I grasp
shrinks?
and a jack-in-the-box, again and again
each time doubling in size?
How can I possibly
when each time I do
somebody yells, Wake up ?

THE MATTER OF SMILES

after reading "The Magic Years"

(1)

The nurse hands him to me and smiles
I smile back
she smiles back-back.
And his face swivels between hers and mine
and decides to complete the triangle.
It's only a split but anyone could see:
That there exists more than one face
is to him AMUSING

and he, not exactly smiles
not exactly smirks
but something
something nice.

(2)

At six days, honest
on the big bed that twilight
Arin and I pass him back and back
and he recognizes it, the eternal triangle
and he does it again
only this time not a smirk

and not reflex
not gas
not even something.

(3)

Like a blind person's hand, and just as eager
his eyes are tracing our faces.
Left to right, he reads us
top to bottom.
Just as tender.
Just as slow.
But he doesn't have to go to the end
has already learned the context.
He remembers from trimesters ago
when, slowly in the dark, his own features were lighting up.
Yes, he recognizes us
in his image.
And he forms the smile
in our image.

LITTLE

Not little as a molecule
or a bee or a bird
not epsilon-little, not delta-little
probably, in fact, greater than one.

And not little enough to hold in your palm
or keep in your pocket
or under your pillow.

But little enough to drape over one arm.
Little enough to put down on the bed and admire the whole of him
in one glance.
And little enough so if he were to get lost in the house and couldn't cry we'd
tear out the walls in a frantic scream.

I catch myself feeling this way
and rush with him to the rocker
to feel this way some more.

ONE WEEK

I don't want to place the plush Tyranisaurus Rex first to his left, then
move it slowly to his right.
I don't care if his eyes follow.
I don't care if his eyes lead.

I don't want to make eye contact.
I don't want to make mouth contact.
I only want to hold him
in this still-spherical universe
and parallel-play.

A PROBLEM AT ONE-AND-A-HALF WEEKS

I lock on his face.
I lock and am locked.
His rosewater skin
is so easy to behold.
But then suddenly I panick.
Suppose I need to rub my eyes?
Suppose I need to blow my nose?
Yes, suddenly I panick.
Or maybe just yawn.

A SOLUTION

Gazing at him
is not boring
only tiring

like watching a soap opera
like writing these poems
like reading those books
like anything at all.

Beauty is in the eyes
of the beheld
and gazing at him draws me
to a long warm sleep.

Just-plain being with him
not boring
not tiring

like when he was in me
not only in my arms
and I held him close
with all my skin

and could not gaze.

OH, HOW COULD I EVER LIVE WITHOUT A TWO-WEEK BABY?

On my lap he sees
the lamp, the window
a doorway of air
an especially large wall.
In my arms he sees
on all eight sides
is happy seeing
kicking or still.

But eventually it occurs to him:
He hasn't the foggiest what to do next
or how to go about it.
So he fusses.
Or futies.
Or calls.
Or whimpers.
Or just keeps on eating.

THE THEORY OF THE POST-PARTUM FETISH

A baby comes out smeared
with that wet sticky stuff
smelling even stranger
than seaweed or sex.
The mother, too, gets slimed
with something
something
yes, something has radiated
and stopped on her skin.

They wash it off the baby
as much as they can.
And they keep telling the mother
to go take a shower.

But the film persists
dense, solid.
The film insists
oily, dry.
It sticks to the skin of others
which explains why, when she touches, she lingers
and why, when she touches the baby, she lingers more.
It take up space, possesses weight
and clings to the dust and air

which explains why she moves so slowly.

THE FURY OF MATERNITY #2

In fifty years or so
I'll probably have a dying-fetish.
(Ya know, "I-Marion-Cohen-actually-died.").
Because no one will listen long enough, I'll write All About It.
What I said, what they said, how long it took.
I'll forget 16, 6, 3, 6, and 3 hours.
I'll forget "So we'll just do a C/ Section"
"If it doesn't hurt to push, push."
"Yep, you can push."
"Yeah, go ahead and push."
I'll forget "Baby, baby."
"Oh, baby, baby."
"I just had a baby."
I'll show everyone the new wound I died from.
"Hey, what're THESE?" someone'll ask
as she comes across the two faded parallel smiles.
"Oh, THOSE old things," I'll shrug. "They're just... oh, whaddaya call
them? .. Cesarean scars..."
Yeah, I'll forget how much better
the childbirth fetish is.

TWO SURREAL POST-PARTUM DREAMS

(1)

You know how typewriters can't run without ribbon? Well, my milk can't flow without tape.

And true, the hospital did send us home with a small supply.

But that got used up this morning.

Rite Aid has only bottles and Pampers.

And the baby's hungry. Now.

(2)

Kidnappers have my baby and I chase them around the corner.

When I find them they're lying in the carriage with the baby also sucking their fists.

THREE WEEKS

That there is more than one face.
That there is more than one room.
That you can't see what you hug.
That, given two objects, they probably don't touch.
That, in fact, most objects
are far from one another.

All this he learns
shock by shock
and after each learning
he needs to eat.

That's what you do when you're a mother.
Make it all possible.
Make it all bearable.

It's not the excitement, it's the tenderness.
The warmth, the loveliness
the necessary thing.

THE FURY OF MATERNITY #3

“What IS it about babies?”

“Maybe nothing. Maybe nature just makes the mothers such that they love the babies so they take care of them and the race continues.”

But I don't like that.

I want there to be real things.

I want there to be real reasons.

Real mothers. Real babies.

I want it to be real.

THE FURY OF MATERNITY #4

Freda DOESN'T have a childbirth fetish.
Labor is what she had to go through to get a baby.
Bleeding makes her weak.
Afterbirth contractions hurt.
And her fat isn't beautiful.

When the nurse put in a suppository she was embarrassed.
When they changed her maternity napkin she felt more comfortable.
When they kneaded her belly it made her nervous.
When she changed from her birthing gown into her own lacy nightie it
felt great.
And she was impatient to get home.

ALREADY

“I will carry you away.” -- bridegroom, in a
story about the Right of the First Night

In existential abandon
down a white brick road
I carry him away

and call out

and call in
my mournful lingo:
I loooove that look
I loooove that fuss
I loooove, loooove that beeee-bee

knowing full well I mean neeed that look
neeed that fuss
neeed, neeed that beeee-bee.

For pretty soon he'll be just-plain cute
and I will be just-plain happy.

ORDINARY HAPPINESS

“She would have to get used to ordinary beauty...”
the ending to one version of “Beauty and
the Beast”

100% oxygen
too pure
too high

barefoot in the park
laughter in the rain
floating on the moon
Xmas, a dream

ordinary happiness
ordinary joy
like ordinary beauty
ordinary truth

THE NIGHTMARE OF HAPPINESS

"Babies are soooo happy -- and then suddenly they fuss, even seem frightened."

"I'm soooo happy, and there's something nightmarish about it."

"I'm soooo happy," you say
not adding more and more o's
but ever-enlarging that one o.
Your mouth a hug
your arms an embrace
wider and wider, fuller and fuller
until you hold the house across the street
half the town, three quarters of the sky
until you no longer see your arms
until you hold more than you see.
You stagger back, and back again
but what you frame comes forward
just as a road, though you move it along, never gets shorter
and what you thought you would swallow
swallows you.

Not yet wounded, you nonetheless fall
back and back, arms still a lasso but behind you
and now shrinkiing to the point at minus-infinity on the nape of your neck
or perhaps to a single handcuff.

"I'm soooo happy," you maintain
and it all stands before you. It gets in your eyes, your ears, your creases.
As for the o of the mouth
as in hole, behold, or Anne Sexton's "Oh"
that's now an oo
as in moo, moon, room, wound
or ow
like owl, howl, crowd, round
or sound itself.
It's the longest widest emptiest vowel
zero as the four oh's in 100%
or the two oh's of infinity.

And there you just are, like at a party.
The room is square but they're all around.
They form a circle, then dance in one
and your eye, your head, your field of vision
everything, big and small, is round unless proven otherwise
and you keep falling
back and down
into the one
universal
capital Oh

the halo
the Operator
the zero
the hoop
the ring-a-round-a-rosy
you
all
fall
down.

SIBLING FURIES

(1)

Poor Elle, all she wants to do is walk along Chestnut Street with Beebee in the Snugli.

She can't concentrate on her homework, and her boyfriend doesn't get as excited as she does about walking around with Beebee.

Poor Elle, when people see her walking around with Beebee, they shake their heads disapprovingly.

Poor Elle, everything about her boyfriend makes her feel like crying, especially the way whiskers grow out under his chin.

She'd like to bypass high school, college, boyfriend, travel, and just get down to business with Beebee.

In the morning she tiptoes into our room and stares down, Beebee's teeny head atop my arm, my nightgown open in the front, drifting like a veil.

Poor Elle, she's got the post-partum blues.

(2)

Arin sniffs the back of Beebee's hair, murmuring "that little baby smell".

On the way up to his room he pokes his head into ours because "this whole room smells like Beebee."

And yesterday, sniffing Beebee's hair, "Mom, why'dja hafta wash it? Now it just smells like Ivory soap."

"You look so different, Mom," he continues. "I've never seen you like this before. Your'e glowing."

He sees, smells, fully knows what he will never have.

(3)

On my left a Binky shows off his charms.

My right contains a Bidy arm across my lap.

He doesn't stare at me.

He stares in.

Shoulders hunched.

Head cocked.

One thumb on Binky's picky.

The other in his own mouth.

UN-BONDING

The first day I said I'm soooo happy.
The second day I said I'm sooo happy.

Until the day I said I'm not THAT happy.

And another day I said he's not THAT cute.

And it's true, sometimes he's lovelier than others.
Which means other times he's less lovely than some.

In the family ed
I have dreams
where he isn't.

Yes, sometimes I'm with him
sometimes I'm not.
Which is it? -- make up my mind.

Two flights up my other children
carry him around.
I don't know which is sadder
when he cries or when he laughs.

THE FAMILY BED: FOURTEEN REASONS

(1)

Babies look even teenier in a big bed next to a big adult.

(2)

And they're cheaper and more natural, even, than solar heat.

(3)

He even gives us light.

Yes, his head is like a lamp.

It glows -- or something -- in the dark.

(4)

Teeny limbs that used to kick my inside
now kick my outside.

(5)

Sometimes I awaken to his face and sometimes to the back of his head.

Either way it's little and round.

Either way it's him.

(6)

Sometimes he works his way perpendicular
soon ramming again my waist
or nestling in my armpit.

The way babies in cribs seek the corner.

The way babies in wombs seek the bottom.

The way the fertilized egg
seeks the deepest point.

(7)

It's a chilly night so over him goes

first his two-by-two red-checkered quilt

then the blue wooly one, folded in quarters

finally our own king-sized polyfoam.

Not only he with us.

But his with ours.

(8)

Most people, lying on their stomachs and turning their heads

first lift them from the mattress.

But babies just drag them along

nose and all

pivoting on their chins

balancing on their foreheads

soon emerging with that wry fetus look

the look I love

the look I know I'll miss.

(9)

When he sleeps I can't help it
I lie awake staring
sometimes as long as an hour.
I'd be crazy to choose the dark
A fool to cover my eyes.
Although he's little
I open them wide.

(10)

One night we awaken swimming in moonlight.
Turned towards the window he gives a shriek of delight.
I place my head over his and, cheek to cheek, we watch together.
When I was a baby I was afraid of the moon
hated the way it crawled over my room
asked my mother to take it away.
Now I kiss just under his ear and think
"THIS oughta give him a good first impression.
"THIS'll introduce him gently to the moon.
"It won't be like with me."

(11)

I dream he's been kidnapped.
The kidnapper calls on the phone but I can't hear because the other
children won't stop screaming.
Shaking, trembling, I suddenly feel myself holding him
nursing him
right then
right there
both of us breathing hard.

(12)

He can't be really-kidnapped
out of this bed.

(13)

It most people slept with their arms straight out, they'd have to sleep alone.
But babies' arms are so short
shorter than our hands
shorter than their heads
shorter, even, than the distance between us.

(14)

He will still grow up.
Just twice as slow.

SIX WEEKS

Suddenly he straightens
stiffens
arches.
And his pitch rises.
And his vowel shortens.

They say it's fear of falling.
But maybe, when his arms stretch like that
he thinks he's holding the entire world
or trying to.

Or maybe he just starts to feel his back
learns the extent of all he can't see.

THE FURY OF MATERNITY #5

Certain views like cuter than others.
For example, when you're the one kissing him.
Or when you're the one holding him.
Loveliest of all, when you're the one nursing him.
His nose gets extra-pug, his cheeks extra-squooshed
his eyes extra-wide and -deep.

But others don't believe you.
Or at any rate they're silent.
Nor do YOU understand THEM
until, later, when the photos come back
and later still, when you have ONLY the photos.
Then you reluctantly join their side.

THE FISHER-PRICE PRETEND-BABY

If you put your second finger in its head
thumb and third in each arm
then wrap it in its blanket

you can cuddle it close
and it'll cock its head
rub its eyes
stretch
burrow
wiggle
peek-a-boo

exactly like a real baby
in too many ways.

TWO MONTHS

Big eyes smiling, cooing, at me.
But then suddenly he'll fuss.
Or actually cry.
Because he's tired of it.
Or just plain tired.
Or he thinks, "Is that all there is?"

Or maybe I'M one of the above
and it shows on my face.

REVELIE AT TWO AND A HALF MONTHS

Where is he?
How did he get here?
Is he newly born?
Or newly died?

There is nothing to eat.
Nothing to see.
Nothing new to conquer.

So he calls
calls
calls again
never once fearing that the wrong person or thing will come get him

and when it does
quiets, anyway
then cries, briefly, anew.

2:00 A.M. AND ALL IS WELL

His warm body
stays at my breast.
Only his bottom lip
only slightly away
as his pointy chin
sinks deeper.
Later his head rolls in my hand
as it didn't down the birth canal.
It pivots, right and left
as though it can't decide.

With my right index finger I tickle him, just under his ear
knowing that'll bring on the cute-kid look.
Then "Devin," I lingo, "it's time for a multiple choice test: The middle of the
night is for: (A) sleeping (B) eating (C) playing (D) pooping."
Without hesitation Devin replies "All of the above."

Some poets say babies cry vowels.
This one laughs consonants.

THE FURY OF MATERNITY #6

Today Sandra came to see the baby.
She did not ask how IT went.
She did not comment on how great I look considering IT.
She did not remark how smooth and round his face is (That's because
IT was a Cesarean.)
She was ruthless; not only did she not even ask what he weighed, she
looked askance when I told her.

I wanted Sandra to come see the baby earlier.
It was not my idea that she come too late.

MARCH 7, 1986

Such charm, such flirting, such ache-ing loveliness
can't be merely cute.
Or else cuteness is beauty.
Or else cuteness is truth
the truth that we all
when you come right down to it
are pleading.

THREE MONTHS

That I cannot kiss both cheeks at the same time.
That the room is not symmetric.
That things get in the way of one another.
That objects do not smile back.

That places are not brought to him.
That what smiles down
is not what holds up.
And that for everything learned
is something forgotten.

I SING HIM SAD SONGS

"What shall we do with the drunken sailor?"

"Where are you going / little one, little one? Where are you going / my precious, my own?"

And I hum the tune from that dream. "How come you're not / wrinkled and old / even though you're over / 80 years of age?"

Yes, sad soft songs
some slow, some fast.

And then I get happy.

Thrust him up, exaggerated motion, quick lingo.

"How'dja get all the way up there?"

No longer sad but still soft.

Something about questions to babies.

Something, I know not what.

Except that we really are
asking them something.

“RUSSIAN WATER BABIES”

There are times and places
where babies walk at three months
talk at three weeks
smile at three minutes.

But “for everything learned
“is something forgotten”
especially if learned too soon.

UN-BONDING #2

He doesn't coo as much after nursing.

He doesn't stutter on his sucking.

And when he holds my finger he knows it.

In the family bed
his face is now higher.

As for me
definitely back to craving chocolate and shopping.

Questions: How could I even have thought three months was newborn?
At what age (for I don't remember) does the newborn sadness completely
disappear and they're just-plain cute?
Should i call this book "The Universat Fuss"?

As compensation he adds on new consonants
grows into his white spring outfit
cultivates the careful-smile
and has a night lovelier
than all previous nights.

I DREAM THE BABY ASKS SAD QUESTIONS

In the train station, "Mommy
"why are you standing so LONG?"
Pause. "Why are you WAITING so long?"
And later, back home, "Where, Mommy
"where?
"Where's
"the rest
"of the room?"

BLIND BABIES

Three months out of the womb
hands and eyes flirt with each other.
Slowly they pivot
as though on opposite ends of a stick.
But later the dance ebbs
and the eyes become flat.
Yes, soon the eyes give up
and the hands find other partners.

UN-BONDING #3

I hardly ever call him Dewdrop any more.

I no longer feel existential shock every time I nurse him.

His cries and laughs are both louder.

And in a month he'll be the age Elle was when she started crawling.

He is still lovely

still sad

still more moving than just plain cute.

But if you ask "Why babies?"

I can't answer as plaintively as before.

THREE-MONTH POST-PARTUM FETISH DREAM

They should re-admit the mothers, with the babies, into the hospital.
They should serve them meals
straighten their beds
restrict visiting hours.

The insurance should cover it.

There should be a lounge to socialize in
a vase of large roses
and fridge stocked with neat little juices.

Every morning they should take temperatures
bring iron pills
press bellies
and ask questions.

You should not have to dream
that, wrapped in a single cloth
the two of you sneak in
and check each room.
And when a kind nurse asks
"What do you need?"
you should not have to say
"I forget".

SO BINKY AND I PLAY-HOSPITAL

“Stay secluded with Devin for awhile” -- Peggy McMahon

Stay in bed all day
diapers by our side
sleeping when the other sleeps
and that's a lot.

We pretend I've had a three-month post-partum complication
a Hollywood complication
just something that requires observation.

We pretend we're important enough
to be observed.

And he KNOWS we're playing hospital
LIKES playing hospital
thanks me for playing hospital

is in my pocket like a baby kangaroo
kicks me in that same soft rhythm
rolls his eyes that same soft way.

SOME POLITICS OF MOTHERHOOD AT LAST

(1) The Message We Get:

We start out proud
flaunting belly, pram, blood and sweat.
And when street curbs don't lower for us
red lights don't turn green for us
(but green lights turn red for us)
when double-doors don't open
but double thank-you's are expected --
we struggle proud, we struggle joy.
And we flaunt the struggle, we love to flaunt.
Yes, when we go bump in the day we SAY "I'm sorry"
but we mean "I'm proud."

We would stay proud
if they didn't shame us.
Make us wait in line even if the baby's crying.
Make us fold the stroller even if the baby's sleeping.
And make us take them out in the cold.

Make them wear bulky snowsuits.
Make them sustain drippy noses (because we forgot the tissues and they
don't have any.

Hands full, hearts full, but they make it monkey business.
Prod us with sticks and boots
like on the slave ships from Africa
like to the ovens in Germany.

"Dance, Mama, dance."

the dance of shame
the dance of blame
I FEEL that dance
earlier this time.

(2) A Frustration:

The rhythm of maternity has been disturbed
by older children, or downright adults.

And it's not for THEM to decide
when MY baby sleeps
or rather, when MY baby wakes UP.

And I didn't put him to bed because I was tired
I put him to bed because HE was tired.

And he's tired, still
will be tired for awhile
because sleep is unlike China
once broken can't be mended

not so fast.

They have interfered with nature.
They have intercepted our hormones.
They have interrupted the cycle.
And it's none of their business.
And they keep trying it.
"Can we come in? We promise, we'll whisper."
Well, even a whisper
isn't the maternal heartbeat.

I don't take this personally.
I take this politically.
And what gives them the right?
What gives them the right?

BIG

chubby-big, cuddly-big, puffy-fluffy-snuffy-big
big like a baby panda
big like a baby monster
who says take me, help me, please don't back away from me.

and big like the self

also, big enough to pick up without bending odwn
big enough to play footsie in the family bed

just something mving, tonight, about this bigness.

When he was in me he grew to reach my inside walls.
Now he' grows to reach my outside walls.
Or something.

TEN MONTHS

His crawling knees don't mind roughness.
But if floor turns to rug he retaces his steps.
And he walks holding on, the chair, the wall
not caring where or whether it ends.
And he wants to go
where things are thrown.
And he throws things where
he wants to go.

And as for sadness:
He can be calm and roundly bent
over a Fisher-Price hexagon or a Guild-Guidance octagon
when suddenly the tap of my foot
will reverberate to his ears
so close is he to the floor

and the short-i cry
the sputter of aitches
the frantic about-face
would compete with a newborn

or else he DOESN'T cry
merely sets out
and halfway along, the hare turns tortoise
and contemplates the remaining half.

For to him every motion is sweeping
every mover a searchlight
and every distance across the sky.

PEEK-A-BOO AT ONE YEAR

Behind the chair
beneath the bed
up and down
up and down

behind the crtb
big smile
up, down
up, down

but not ALL the way down
not just yet.

ONE YEAR, ONE A.M., ONCE

His head is no longer teeny
and his legs touch mine.
But I forget that.

Also, the radius of his fist is no longer epsilon.
But it's still small-r.

And his features gather.
The lines of his eyes
and the curl of his nose
come close to his mouth
as though trying to join it at my nipple.

"You're
"love-
"ly," I whisper.
And then more serious.
"Do you know how lovely
"and how lov-ed?"
Next: "If you were the only thing in the world
"twould be reason enough to have a world."

And then I form
those three little words
more slowly
than ever before.

“THE WEIRDEST IS THE BALL”

In his twenty-second month everything is a ball
not only ping-pong, tennis, volley
and not only apples and oranges
but the red or yellow end of the Fisher-Price carpet sweeper
or, at the pediatricians, the part you squeeze of the blood-pressure kit.
A semi-ball is also a ball
extra-large nail-heads on the park bench
or the three-dimensional shield on the carved oak column.
And he sees balls above
sun, moon, little stars
and those almost-Proustian streetlamps drifting in the square.
“Ball,” he whines
“ball,” he intones
as though they were crystal balls.

But he hasn’t yet noticed the biggest ball of all
the ball so big he can’t see its ball-ness
the ball so wide it never goes away
the ball so strong that IT bounces HIM..
As he rides in the stroller I point down.
“Ball,” I say. “Look. Ball.”
But he DOESN’T look, not at THAT ball.
He turns every way but that.

One ball, though, he points out to me.
“Ball,” he says, when he’s just finished eating on me.
“Ball, ball.” He WANTS that little ball.
Yes, fussing and fuming and threatening to fury, he tries to pull it off me
and I have to explain.
“No, no, Binky, you can’t have THAT ball.
“Some balls are fixed, some balls are stuck.
“Some balls, like the one you’re standing on
“and the one you’re eating on
“don’t come off.”

WHY I STILL BREASTFEED BINKY EVEN THOUGH
HE JUST TURNED TWO

(1)
because of Little Blonde Curls
some flattened, some free
others pressed to degrees of springi-ness

yes, because of straw spun to soft gold
squiggle upon squiggle spiralling
into the big and little valleys

yes, because of golden locks
to every one of which
I have the key

(2)
because of morning-glory eyes
under sunbeam lashes
advancing and retreating
and arching
and settling

because of that flirtatious gyroscope
best at THIS distance

(3)
because he salts it
with the little yellow car
or brandishes a Fisher-Price fork

or brings over Raggedy Ann or Little Orphan Annie
to join in the feast

(4)
and then offers some to me

(5)
because he threads up his arm
in my waistline, out my neckline

because of newborn gurgles
and old-born giggles
and peek-a-boo
which he calls just-plain boo

(6)
because threading, now, his feet, he goes "b'anket"

(7)

because when he doesn't sleep through the night I know just what to do

(8)
because of every night-night
along my left side
soft, warm
moving, pressed

protecting me from nazies
poetry workshops
fear-itself
that funny sensation in my left knee
and the quality of the next dawning

protecting me enough
so I don't need anything
along my RIGHT side

(11)
because of his plump hand on the other one
how it pivots, roams, opens, closes
trying to contain
but still too small

(12)
because of his other arm
the one tucked to numbness under and among
the one he forgets about
the one I'd forget about
if two tiny nubbers didn't nub out
or nudge
or flex
or just-plain grow warm

(13)
because of those proud times I get
the door with him across me
I wear him like a stole
or a shield
or a cat

or the Ten Commandments

I hold him up
for all to obey.

(14) A Theory of Discipline:
We-can't-have-everything-we-want-in-life
but that's not his FAULT

so after breaking his frantic grip on the tenth cookie
or pulling him out of the spice drawer

I take him up

and croon "I'm sorry".

"I'm SO sorry you-can't-have-everything-you-want-in-life.

"I'm so sorry that, no sooner do you discover that the-whole-world-is-yours
"you have to also discover that most of it isn't.

"I'm ever so sorry," I sigh

"that, even without wars, pollution, rape, capital punishment, and disease

"the little red berries would still be poisonous

"the long smooth bannister would still be dangerous

"and the strawberry chapstick would still be Bret's.

"I don't mean I apologize.

"It's not MY fault, either.

"It's just the ol' many-body problem

"a mathematical theorem that, if you hit Bret, Bret gets hit by you.

"But all is not lost," I continue, bending further down.

"Even though you-can't-have-everything-you-want-in-life

"you can still have SOME things. In particular, you can always cuddle-up

"nice 'n' cozy.

"For any little squiggle you can always come squiggling.

"Always, any time

"you can always have

"this."

THE FAMILY BED: ANOTHER REASON

“Say I’m lonely, say I’m sad.
“Say that health and wealth has missed me.
“Say I’m broken down but add
“Jenny kissed me.” Langston Hughes

Binky’s turning in the bed.
Dimpled hands are flexing sweetly.
Curled up nose and curly head
comin’ ‘round the bend to meet me.

Binky’s turning in his sleep.
Arm slaps down like a bulldozer.
Binky’s face begins to peep
also comes a little closer.

Say I’ve struggled, say I’ve lost.
Say both candle-ends are burning.
Say my dreams have been star-crossed.
But add, Binky’s turning.

TO SAY GOOD NIGHT AND MEAN HELLO

(1)

“Good-night.”

“Good-night.”

“Good-night.”

“Good-night.”

Just like the Waltons.
Only all the voices
from the same part
of the house.

(2)

The way, dropping off
we usually flash
not exactly a prayer
but a thought, a reminder
a second of silence
that we are leaving
that we are entering
that God and loved ones
are fast becoming dead

the way we take firm note
that we are about to become
even more than alone

THAT’S not the way HE does it; dropping off to sleep
HE rolls CLOSER
or makes that ninety-degree twist, another ninety-degree flip
landing across us, along us
throwing off his blanket, pulling on ours
crossing our paths
again and again
snuggling into corners
we didn’t know we had.

THIS ONE

If I breastfeed this one
even longer
past toddler-hood, past childhood
safely to another woman's breast

if I keep this one in our bed
stand up, stand over
not blink all night
til he makes his own family, his own family-bed
also not blink all day

if I homeschool this one
be his letters, his numbers
be enough of an earth mother
to be his earth

then maybe the second mind
won't sneak up on this one
won't seize the first mind
won't erase the first mind

won't turn the terrible two's
into the terrible five's
into the third mind
into the fourth and fifth.

WHY I STILL BREASTFEED BINKY EVEN THOUGH
HE JUST TURNED THREE

(1)
because of those fists
two separate little balls
appearing various nooks
like under his chin
or both on one side of his face

merrily merrily rolling along
like wheels
of a toy train.

(2)
because of certain SWOLLEN moods
he both swells and huddles
swells to reach my outside
huddles to reach my inside
swells, huddles, and cuddles
it all evens out

(3)
because of the close-up profile
which he knows I'm gonna come get.
I grab it when he's sleeping
and then I fall asleep to it.
I stare and stare.
I brush. I burrow.
I keep it at bay. I bay it at keep.
I stare until I un-stare
until it drifts into
the faraway profile.

(4)
"I wanna eat, Mommy. I wanna eat, Mommy."
The whole time I'm scrubbin' his face.
The whole time I'm puttin' on his 'damas.

And then, in his hurry, he jams his toes into the HEELS so that slows things
down even MORE.
And when that's straightened out, he rushes at me so fast he bumps his head.

In fifteen years he'll say "I was too old"
"You shouldn't have let me so long."
"It's all an illusion, anyway."
"What COULD have been so important?"

(5)
"How old are you?"
"Two."
"No, you're three. BEFORE you were two; now you're three."
And then he bursts into tears.
And then he bends and sobs.

And do I go to him?
You bet I go to him?
And is he hungry?
You bet he's hungry.
And does it help?
You bet it helps.

(6)
Taking off his red sock he notices a thread stuck on his toe.
"Kiss it," he sobs. "Kiss it."
Then, striving for more accuracy, "I wanna bandy. I wanna bandy."
On the third try he gets it right. "I wanna eat. I wanna eat."
And does he eat?
You bet he eats.
And is he delicious?
You bet he's delicious.

(7)
And that time in the square
along came Mattie
even though it wasn't Monday.
She came with her wide arms and smile.
And even though it wasn't Monday she said "Honey..."
and "Of COURSE you can have a pretzel."
And for awhile Mattie stayed.
But then she took up her bag
and gave him a long hug.
He followed her into the grass
then along the concrete.
He kept trotting, then watching, then crying
as she began another path
toward the children she was with.

And was he then hungry?
And was he then thirsty?
And am I writing this in my lingo?
You bet.

(8)
"The TV's not LIKE the VCR," I try to explain. "The TV's just at certain times. On
TV Superboy's just 6:30 on Saturdays. See, TV works... well, HERE'S how
it works. See, there's a PLACE, with people, and they put on shows, like
Superboy-shows. And... oh, it goes into the camera and through wires and
stuff, and then it goes into everybody's TV's. But only at certain times."
He has been looking increasingly upset. I, too, have been increasing. Finally
we both shrug, smirk, fling up our arms, and he says, "I wanna eat."
So while he's eating I try again; I say exactly the same words, exactly the
same way. Only this time he listens, this time he nods.
Yes, remember "Three Weeks"? And remember "Three Months"?
Well, at three YEARS, too. During each learning. He needs to eat. It helps to eat.
Food for thought, thought for food. That's what you do when you're a mother.
Make it all palatable. Make it all digestable.

(9)

Not “he’ll sleep on it” but “he’ll eat on it”.

(10)

The way they go right TO it
as the crow flies
as the rocket zooms.
They move their whole bodies, their whole selves
as though absolute motion
were possible.

(11)

8:30 P., tired fussy kid.
“Night- night?” I inquire.
“NO WAY.”
Immediately I switch gears. “Are you HUNGRY?”
Well, that’s a different story.

(12)

“I throw happy-dust, plant happy-seed.
“I inhale happiness; I exhale happiness; I AM happiness. Am I myself happy?” --
In the poem it ends “Well, does fear-itself tremble? Does anger-itself utter
a sound?...”
But in the kitchen at the counter, feeding Binky on my left, slicing tomatoes on my
right
it ends with an arm-stretching, head-lifting, body-dancing, resounding
eternal ubiquitous “yes”.

LITTLE AGAIN

In the center of the bed the little one's munches get infinitesimal and I pull off
and sneak a half-turn around
to the big one.
I choose him BECAUSE he's bigger
because he's warmer.

But then I hear the little one:
"Not your BACK, Mommy7. I'm AFRAID of your back."

And of course I turn around
to him, the little one
the scanner warmth, the denser stove

as the earth chooses its smaller objects
as the sun chooses its smaller planets
as a convergent series ultimately must chose smaller and smaller numbers.

Of course.

OUR FOURTH YEAR

“I’ll have more nostalgia for motherhood
than for childhood.”

I don’t like
that animals don’t hug much
and that a mother dolphin and her baby
are merely tangent.
I don’t like newborn colts struggling to their feet
and ducklings all in a row.
I haven’t yet decided
about all those baby bees
and fish that eat their young
and twin kangeroos.
And I’m not completely freaked
by worms pulling in half
nor by Charlotte of the Web and her bundle of fetuses.

But this final un-bonding
is killing me.
That he now has to be dressed wispy
in order to look wispy
that it has to be summer
for his blonde to curl
and sunlight
for his curl to blonde.
And I don’t like that only the OUTSIDE of his mouth is lovely
that, without vitmain E, my nipples are dry and sore
that the cups of thick white milk
no longer runneth over. Don’t like at all
that to fit in my lap
he has to fold in half
that the dear little fuss
and the fury
and the fetish
are more inappropriate than ever
and that the close-up-profile
is becoming a mere nose.

WHERE I'LL GO

"When a life is over
the one you were living for
where do you go? ..." Anne Sexton

I'll take a job.
I'll join a choral group.
I'll write children's books.
I'll make children's records.
And I'll have grandchildren
those big bugs.
Like a divorced father I'll court them.

I'll do math
that first great-love.
I'll re-discover the joys of the suffering-scientist.
I'll stalk the thrift-stores.
I'll collect baby clothes.
I'll read the Devin-poems
tearfully weekly.

"I'll work nights."
"I'll dance in the city."
"I'll wear red for a burning."
White for a freezing.
"And there'll be no scream
"from the lady in" black
no scream at all
from the Phantom of the Labor Room
and the figure at the desk
that weeping-mathematician
dribbling our epsilons and deltas and squiggles.
No scream whatever
from number-woman
no scream from the Slave
of the Long Proof.
No scream, no prayer
from Marion Deutsche.

I'll hold a kitten
or a Cabbage Patch doll.
I'll sit every night
and pat my womb.
I'll masturbate my nipples.
I'll go to bed
lie down and play-hospital
all by myself.

WHERE I'LL GO #2

I'll write. I'll thrift. I'll give a party.
And there'll be no scream
from the woman in the dress.
The dress'll hang long
zip down the back
past chest, past waist
past knees, past hell.
No little tossed
undaunted curls
barging under the hemline
past the waistline
patiently making the long trip up.
No one fussing, no one furing
no one needing
what's under the dress
quite that much.

THE EXISTENTIAL PROBLEM

"There's two mama's."

"There two daddy's."

"There's a monster mommy."

"There's a monster daddy."

"There's monsters downstairs."

"There's monsters in the bed."

Yes, even in the family bed, there are monsters.

Maybe even under the blankets.

Before eating he looks up at me. "Are you mommy?"

"Yes I'm mommy."

Other times he says "I'm scared."

Quietly I answer "I'm scared, too."

THE EXISTENTIAL SOLUTION

Three and a half and feverish
and everything is scar-ing.
The phone is scar-ing, the bell is scar-ing.
That big chair, at that small angle, is scar-ing.
People just walking around, not looking at him, is scar-ing.

But, three and a half and feverish
and being kissed and carried
he suddenly pauses into my face.
“YOU’re not scar-inig.”

Serious.
Loving.
And relieved.
As though having considered the possibility
that maybe I am.

ANOTHER PROBLEM

He's mean, he's obnoxious, he hits me. "Whatsamatter, Bubba? What do you need?"

"I need to hit you."

At such times I rock with him. "Oh, I know," I croon. "Neither of us want you to get bigger and we don't know how to stop it. We've definitely decided; we want to stay this way. We've asked nature, put in an application, but nature has said no.

"Nature has rejected us, nature has accepted us.

"Bubba, oh Bubba, what're we gonna do?"

WHERE IT GOES

Editors, especially feminist-press editors,
have said, about other work, things like “I
want it to be MORE” and “I hoped it would
TRANSCEND” and “Where does it GO?”

It goes
and has gone
anywhere and everywhere
most of it predictable.
Towards, for example, mothering your adult children
mothering the world’s children
mothering the world
mothering oneself.
And it goes
and has gone
towards more politics
more excitement
more tenderness
more fuss, more fury.

But right now it goes
from whence it came.
And it’ll end up
where it began.
WITHOUT, that is, a two-week baby
or a two-month baby
or a two-year baby.
Towards ordinary happiness, ordinary truth
ordinary fuss, ordinary fury.

I’m the explorer in “The Little Prince”.
I’ll end up Deeply Troubled.
Yes, Devin’s the little prince
that dear little form
whose love and purity
know no arguments
who says “Mama” and “the mama” and “I like mama”
“I want EXTRA-Mama”
who, five minutes after eating on both sides of Mama
wants to eat again. And -- Oh God! -- I pushed him away.
“I’m not in the mood,” I cried. “Leave me alone.”

But THEY were asking me questions.
THEY were giving me answers.
“Leave me alone,” I screamed
at that innocent, this lovely.
“Leave me alone,” I sobbed, but this wize one
wouldn’t.

A prince, all tight
a firm little prince

and where it goes
where it all, all goes:
WITHOUT those warm little hands.
Without that little light body.
Without quite that fuss. Without quite that fury.
Without, for sure, the necessary thing
Without, that is, that sweet little prince
but I, still, the sweet big queen.

TWO PROSE EPILOGUES

(1) May 18, 1993

A couple of days ago, walking down Spruce Street with me, Devin asked, "How did we start to love each other?"

"Oh wow!" I thought. "What a great question! It's going to be wonderful to answer that question."

And then I SAID that aloud, although adding, in thought but not words, "I hope he gives me enough time."

"Well," I began. "I remember how I started to love YOU. I started even before you were inside me. I knew I wanted a baby and I knew I'd probably soon have a baby inside me and I loved you even though you didn't exist yet. And then I got pregnant with you [I won't talk about the miscarriages, I thought. That would take up too much time, and too much of his energy.] and I knew you were inside me and... well, I didn't know you yet but I still loved you. I knew you were wonderful, I just knew it. And then I loved you even more -- yes, even more than before. And then when you were born -- Well, WOW!! And you ate on me and you loved it and you looked at me, and everybody else, and I loved you even MORE. I..."

"And how did I start loving YOU?" has asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. "You couldn't talk then, and you can't remember now, but I think... here's what I think: I think... well, when you were first inside me... well, you were so little, you didn't even have a brain so maybe you didn't love me then but, after a while, you probably just felt nice and cozy being inside me, all warm and wrapped up; you probably liked it. And then [How much time do I have?, I thought. "Kids' attention spans are so limited, even for things like this.], then when you were born you probably knew that the same person you were eating on was the one you'd been inside. And then you just kept on liking being with me and..."

And then we were on our front porch and Devin had had enough and yes, the time was up.

(2)

Yesterday, in the square with Devin and his new friend Jade, I saw at a distance of perhaps 100 feet, a mother with a new baby. All I could see was that the baby was tiny and it had on a pink hat. A few of the other mothers were admiring. Toddlers ran and danced about, including what was probably the baby's sibling, whom the new mother kept bending down to and alternately reprimanding and trying to appease. She looked pretty yuppie and she had on a long thick sweater -- too thick, I thought, to bunch up for breast-feeding.

"No," I continued. "She's not like I was. I guess a lot of new mothers aren't like I was. Like, she probably doesn't KNOW she's post-partum. I remember how much I KNEW it, and how much I loved it. And I STILL know it, about both me and her, and I still love it."

"Her skin is raw," I thought. "All of it, not just her perineum or Cesarean incision. Every square inch of it is something precious. She's raw and wrinkling and the baby is a salve. She's the same as an old woman; she's the same as a grandmother. And she is -- WE are -- so beautiful, beautiful in that un-ordinary way. Like the Beast. Even if she doesn't know it."

And now, right now, I'm thinking: What if, instead of running over to and admiring only the baby, what if people went over and admired the MOTHER? Not just passing comments like I used to get every one in a while. "YOU'RE as cute as SHE is." "What a lucky baby, to have such a loving mother." "God bless him, and God bless YOU, too." All wonderful comments. But too short-lived.

What if everyone oogled endlessly over the new mother, crowded around her, oohed and aahed. "Isn't she beautiful?" "Look at that smile." "She's so pale -- from the birth -- from it. Look at those gorgeous pale cheeks. Look at the position of those arms. Look at THIS square-inch of skin -- it's especially raw!"

What if people really looked over the mother, as though she were in a crib or a carriage? Or what if they looked at the both of them together, the mother and the baby? What if, as a baby was nursing, good friends watched both the baby and the breasts and made admiring comments about both? Not only "Lookit that wide open mouth" but "Lookit that full ripe happy nipple." Things like that.

I would love it. It would be a very big piece of the truth that needs to be owned up to.

SOME POEM EPILOGUES

(1)

It's dinner out
one of those big ones
(ya know, festive -- clicking glasses, liquor jokes).
And someone says the full moon is lovely
and someone says the chocolate mousse is lovely
and someone says Mozart is lovely.
And I think, "But not as lovely as babies."

I have been a survivor of not-knowing.
Not knowing the fourth perpendicular.
Not knowing how I will die.
But knowing, that's the kicker.
Knowing the first three perpendiculars.
Knowing how I have lived.

Can I survive the fuss and the fury?
Can I survive happiness?
Or will I die of knowing?
Maybe I already have.

(2)

In old age, suddenly, something makes sense:
It's okay to treat our mama cat like a baby.
She IS a baby.
ALL new mamas are babies.

I remember those five times.
I wished I was somebody's cat.
Peferably, I wished, some mother.
Somebody who Was A Woman And Knew These Things.

She'd set up a box
and she'd bend down.
"You're having babies," she'd say. "You're doing a wonderful job of having
your babies."
And she'd keep on talking.
Keep on bending.
They'd be my babies but she'd clean the box
and sweep the floor and bring me food and pour me water and keep bending down.

(3)

I've decided: From now on, every December 14
I'm going to try to recall one new detail about Devin's birth.
And every October 7 I'll try to recall some new detail about Elle's birth.
And every June 23 something new about Arin.
Also April 30 and December 22.
I could do that with other dates too.

Maybe ever day I could be trying to remember one new detail
after trying to remember what I'm trying to remember one new detail of.
And that could keep me young.
Or at least keep me someone
who was once young.

(4) It really literally does indeed seem like just-yesterday.
All the births seem like just-yesterday.
But in different ways.
Elle's is just-yesterday the way my childhood was just-yesterday.
Devin's is just-yesterday the way yesterday was just-yesterday.
And the others, the middle ones...
they're more muffled, more hidden
like the INSIDES of yesterday.
They're the middle children and I'm the middle mother.
Yes, Elle's is just-yesterday morning, Devin's is just-yesterday evening.
The others' get lost
in the glare of the afternoon.