



RECKLESS

poems

ANDREA
MACPHERSON



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ONTARIO
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reproductions,
or, before the pill

I

pessary, extended nursing, withdrawal

And yet three pale babies in as many years,
the last leaving her bloodless, cold,
her body giving up like a rock in a pond,
sinking.

His next wife was more sturdy,
twenty-one children slipping from her easily,
her body remembering the last time too well.
Miscarriages and stillbirths in between:

twenty-five long years of pregnancy,
her body ballooning, swelling, leaking,
the humiliations of the flesh too real—
blood, babies, breast milk,
the house sour with it all,
and the mattress sagging under his endless need.
Twenty-one names running together into an infinite stream,
the monotony of repetition, of washing diapers and bottles
and socks and underpants and frocks
and short pants and undershirts,
of each day mired in spit-up
and soured milk, of soggy bread
and handprints on the windowpanes,
beds crowded by bodies breathing in each other's dreams,
sicknesses.

Never enough seats at the table
never enough hands to soothe or offer love.

II

diaphragms, condoms, the temperature method

After her husband disappeared,
she slept alone in the alcove by the coal stove
and the icebox,
relishing in the narrow cot,
the way it only had room for her exhaustion.
Now, pleased to have only her own body; stillness.
The wants of the body too base,
too inconvenient, too predictable.
Pleasure just another word for trapped.
Her body obediently bleeds monthly
until it, too,
gives up.

III

Lysol douche, cervical cap, the rhythm method

Already old by thirty,
and so she hurries:
three boys in quick succession,
no time for rest, for scars to heal,
the body to mend. (*Will it ever mend?*)
Just her body turned inside out,
 pain so fresh it radiated
even when she slept; her body a betrayal.
Once, she'd been strong, certain,
hoisting milk jugs, tubs of wet laundry, crates of preserves.
Now, doubled over by the sink
after the last baby (*It has to be the last*)
her womb worn out, rubbed raw,
quick prayers for a reprieve,
 cramps in her uterus a relief.

IV

intrauterine device, sponges, spermicide

Knocked out, blissfully unconscious,
and then: a baby.

Mewling, downy, foreign. A baby.

This pain everywhere, all at once.

Looking for answers in the bottom of a teacup,
the leaves uncertain: *Travel? A stranger? Joy?*

Only sleep like mercy. Sleep like solace.

Sleep like forgetting.

Her heartbeat strummed

no more babies

no more babies

no more babies.

Sex a danger, a fault line;

easier to close her legs, forfeit pleasure.

The pattern of blood in her underpants:

floral.

Did it count if no one witnessed it?

Did it matter if no one named it?

what the doctor knew

That the world was an unhappy place,
and that pain did not begin or end
at conception:
it grew, or did not. Sometimes
it turned into something else entirely—
regret, sorrow, resentment.

That a starved three-month-old
was infinitely worse than the mass of cells
(shapeless and shape-shifting)
dropped into a bowl.

That washing your hands did not erase
the weight of speculum,
the memory of warm skin,
the crust of dried blood that he found later
on the inside of his wrist.

And mostly, that his title was something new,
but the act itself was not—
was as ancient as the impulse of bodies
 coming together,
as desperate, as messy.

the guilty party

They tell her about the guilt,
that it will settle like a winter cloak,
too heavy even in the coldest months.

And so she waited,
days sliding into weeks into months,
and yet it did not arrive.
Winter became spring
the sweet new hyacinth blooms,
milky pale and trembling,
and she was only happy for the lengthening of days,
the stronger shades of sunlight:
a plea, a promise.

Still, there was no beating her chest in regret, shame.
She thought, Another month.

She thought, Soon.

She thought, Someday.

A year passed and she thought about the baby
she would have had by now—
imagined a boy, a head of dark hair,
mewls like a kitten or a small bird—
dreamed him to life,
but did not feel the lingering doubt,
all the things they had promised she'd feel:
no guilt, no regret, no shame.

Outside, the buds turned to blooms over and over,
drooping, too heavy with their own beauty,
and then dropped, withered.
Promised to do it all over again the next year,
and the next, and the next.
She wondered if she was required,

every winter, to pretend guilt,
or if, instead, she could be happy that the snow was gone,
revelling in the promise of those new stalks,
peeking up from the earth, hopeful.

SAMPLE

accident: girl, age fifteen

Queen Anne's lace,
willow, date palm,
pomegranate,
pennyroyal—
so many words for the same
end:

blood pooling
between her legs,
cotton panties ruined
(thrown out in the trash,
buried beneath
Kleenex, candy wrappers,
the soft, pink bits of eraser
from her math homework).

No tears, only silence, the sharp pain
of her stomach contracting.

(No, uterus.
No, *womb*—a word from science class,
the muddy drawing
of a woman's reproductive organs.
Fallopian tubes. Ovaries.
Imagining them like strange,
sad eggs.)

She does not think the word *baby*—
too foreign and too familiar at once,
wrong and sticky and sour in her mouth.
Instead, she tucks herself into bed,
imagines a lullaby her mother once sang,
her flannel nightgown crushed beneath her,
dotted with stars.