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Begetting the Apple: Poems from Women of the Bible

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**Begetting the Apple:
Poems from Women of the Bible**

by

Lindsay McCann Crandall

A thesis submitted to the Department of English at the State University of New York
College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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Poems from Women of the Bible
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For as long as I've been writing poetry, I've been a mainly "confessional" poet, unfolding personal experience within the lines of my poems. My poems were confessional in the sense that they revealed the inner-nakedness of my personal thoughts and feelings. My life with poetry began at age 13 in a trip to the public library where I discovered Anne Sexton's The Death Notebooks on the shelf as a fluke. I opened to the first poem, "Gods," and read:

Mrs. Sexton went out looking for the gods.

She began looking in the sky—

expecting a large white angel with a blue crotch.

No one.

She looked next in all the learned books
and the print spat back at her.

No one.

She made a pilgrimage to the great poet
and he belched in her face.

No one. (349)

Struck by Sexton's unexpected and unapologetic topic choices—suicide, sex, the psalms—and style—I'd never seen someone write so unabashedly—I cherished the moments I had with that book and took for myself the courage to write in the same vein. In addition to struggling with the awkward adolescent transition to womanhood, my parents' divorce and other strained familial relationships pushed me to my bedroom each night an hour before falling asleep to scribble poems and thoughts into my journal. Poetry became my lifeline, my sanity. My writing was always situated in real-life, or simulated real-life, and dealt with very personal feelings. My poems always revolved around me, the poet, and I felt comfortable labeling myself as “confessional,” in the same way Sexton was confessional, though it took years for me to explore what confession really meant. Later, I read and studied Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Sharon Olds, and realized that I too wished to share my poems about the inner-workings of my psyche, the pains of my early childhood, and my own secret wishes to vindicate my erratic behavior.

In the introduction to Poetry as Survival, Gregory Orr describes the process of constructing a personal lyric poem as a means of enduring some sort of existential crisis (4). He says that, in order to write this type of poem, “two crucial things” must be different in the poem from the poet's ordinary life: “First, we have shifted the crisis to a bearable distance from us: removed it to the symbolic but vivid world of language. Second, we have actively *made* and shaped this model of our situation rather than passively endured it as lived experience” (4-5). Orr describes here the act of translating a personal experience into a poem

whose constructs mirror that experience. According to Orr, the personal lyric's "function is to help us express and regulate our emotional lives, which are confusing and sometimes opaque to us" (5). Orr's definition of "personal lyric" has always been my definition of "confessional poetry," that is the revealing of personal and emotional experience within the space of language. In many ways, my poetry has always been poetry of survival, a mode of coping and conquering my personal crises. Writing poems has been a way for me to remove myself from these crises and control them through the crafting of language. Orr writes about his responsibility in his brother's accidental death and how, after being introduced to poetry in his honors English class his senior year in high school, he "knew from that moment on all [he] wanted to do was write poems" (8). Though I was never responsible for the death of a loved one, I could, as a teenager, relate to Orr's sentiment; I too "knew that if I was to survive in this life, it would only be through the help of poetry" (8).

What I have learned through studying some of the great "confessional" poets (confessional in the way I have defined) is that the act of confession or the act of writing the intensely personal does not necessarily limit the writer's poems exclusively to his or her actual life experiences. The poem is merely a vehicle for the poet's personal and emotional exploration, much of which may exist beyond his or her own experiences, but still includes the "I" that categorizes confession. In The Book of Folly, Anne Sexton quickly moves from her personal poem, "Angels of the Love Affair," a poem in which each section includes commentary

by a first-person narrator who can safely be assumed as Sexton herself, to a series of poems called “The Jesus Papers,” in which she writes forthrightly about Jesus Christ and his life. Most of the poems in “The Jesus Papers” are written from a third-person point of view describing aspects of Jesus’ life and moving away from the “I”. However, these poems are not wholly objective and some even include that first-person narrator. Sexton writes in “Jesus Dies”:

From up here in the crow’s nest
 I see a small crowd gather.
 Why do you gather, my townsmen?
 There is no news here.
 I am not a trapeze artist.
 I am busy with My dying. (342)

Here, Sexton takes on the persona of Jesus on the cross, writing with the ever-elusive “I”. It is safe to say that the “I” in “Jesus Dies” is not like the “I” in the poems in her earlier collections, To Bedlam and Part Way Back and Live or Die, but Sexton can’t help but write in her own personal voice and style, interjecting subjectivity with each line. She eventually caps the series, “The Jesus Papers,” with the poem, “The Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks”:

In my dream
 I milked a cow,
 the terrible udder
 like a great rubber lily

sweated in my fingers
 and as I yanked,
 waiting for the moon juice,
 waiting for the white mother,
 blood spurted from it
 and covered me with shame...
 When the cow gives blood
 and the Christ is born
 we must all eat sacrifices.
 We must all eat beautiful women. (344-5)

In this final poem, we hear Sexton's voice clearly, the real Sexton writing and speaking on her own behalf. It is the same voice that has sung out throughout The Book of Folly. In this same manner I have written my Masters thesis, situating extremely personal, emotional, and confessional "I" poems among poems on women of the Bible, poems written from both third- and first-person perspectives capturing the lives of these women all within my personal voice and style. Anne Sexton, my poetic foremother, set a precedent that here I seek to follow: to write unabashedly and unapologetically what I know, what I think, what I believe.

My collection of poems, Begetting the Apple, reinvents women of the Bible, real women who had lived and moved and breathed, captured in passages of religious text. My inspiration for this collection was, admittedly, the less Sexton-like poems of Transformations, a book that left a lasting impression on me

as I wrote an in-depth research paper on Sexton's retelling of Grimm's fairy tales. In many ways, I hoped to evoke the same creative spirit as Sexton in this collection, recreating and retelling stories that are dearly familiar, all the while interjecting glimpses into my personal and emotional life, something Sexton did not do in Transformations but did do in some of her other collections, including The Book of Folly. In Transformations, Sexton retold these fairy tales unabashedly and I mimic her sentiment. She incorporates more humor into her poems than I do mine, however, the spirit of exploration, of plowing down the fences that contain these stories, of breaking down the familiar in order to make new connections and enliven two-dimensional characters is the same in Transformations and my collection, Begetting the Apple. In a letter to Paul Brooks, Sexton writes:

I realize that the "Transformations" are a departure from my usual style. I would say that they lack the intensity and perhaps some of the confessional force of my previous work. I wrote them because I had to...because I wanted to...because it made me happy. (Self-Portrait 362)

My retelling of the stories of women of the Bible is a similar deviation though I have worked to intertwine these retellings with my own "confessional force".

The biblical poems in Begetting the Apple extend beyond merely retelling stories. Writing about women of the Bible offered a greater philosophical context, an opportunity to postulate and pose questions, to invent, and to breathe new life into familiar characters. What was it like to be Eve lying beside Adam

after the Fall? Who is the wife of noble character? How did the prostitute feel when she met Jesus at the well? And how do aspects of contemporary culture serve to enhance our understanding of these women? Poetry offered much in the way of creative liberty as I endeavored to invent the answers to these questions. And with poetic predecessors like Sexton and the equally prolific Carol Ann Duffy, I felt confident to imagine, muse, and suggest much about the women of the Bible. Upon reading Duffy's The World's Wife, a collection of poems written from the perspectives of the wives of famous men, I was struck by Duffy's similar reinvention of Pilate's wife, Delilah, Salome, and Queen Herod. Duffy, who relies heavily upon rhyme and the end sounds of her lines rather than on figurative language, takes on her own perspective of these biblical women. She also finds room within the poem to postulate and proclaim. For example, in the poem, "Queen Herod," after describing the queen looking at her baby daughter and promising that, "No man.../will make her shed one tear" (8), Duffy takes a moment to speak on behalf of queens and mothers:

We do our best,
 we Queens, we mothers,
 mothers of Queens.

We wade through blood
 for our sleeping girls.

We have daggers for eyes. (10)

As I wrote the poems in my collection, I felt very conscious of the latitude and freedom poetry offered me. Each poem was an opportunity to ruminate, reflect, and suggest ideas within the context of the biblical story at hand. Just as Duffy spoke on behalf of mothers and queens, I was able to speak on behalf of wives, mothers, prostitutes, and virgins, each poem a new opportunity to speak out or hold back. The cohesion of this collection lies in the unity of theme—women of the Bible—but the craft of each poem is unique: the voice, tone, language, and rhythm of each poem is unique, just as each woman of the Bible is unique. The reinvention of each woman included a reworking of character and story and, also, the choosing of poetic elements that would be appropriate for that woman. Some poems are longer, some shorter. Some use a lot of figurative language, others not much at all. Some delve deep into the biblical woman's storyline, while some are very superficial. I consider this to be one of the many blessings of writing poetry: poems can and should be unique. I do not consider any of the poems in this collection to be the same, though some may be similar. The poems are as unique as the fingerprints these women would have pressed into the earth, the bed, the people they loved the most. As the poet, I took liberty with these women's lives, giving them faces and hands, pondering their minds, expanding their horizons, allowing each her own unique perspective, voice, and language.

My collection addresses all types of biblical women and sheds new light on each. Some of the poems more traditionally retell stories while others stretch

the character and make new connections to contemporary life. As Amy Benson Brown explains, “the revisionist’s engagement of the ancient text...is really a ‘cover story’ for the writer’s conversation with her own culture” (20). She argues that the writer’s address of her audience is inextricably linked to her address of the ancient text (20). In writing about the Bible through a contemporary context of, say, Ruth and Betty Friedan in my poem “Ruth,” the character and experience of Ruth is reinvented, redefined. By calling Ruth “a Friedanian foremother,/a housewife unbuckled,” she is no longer just another widow in the Bible. She is not just an example of perseverance and servitude. Ruth is now a feminist. Making her a feminist by no means changes her character; it slightly alters it to shed new light on an old familiar character:

Ruth, autonomic ancestress,
 industrious in the harvest,
 carefully weaving the stooks—
 how far we’ve come from conventional
 femininity, how far
 we’ve found our hands
 soaped and sanctioned,
 enveloped with clout,
 how far, how far we’ve come.

By juxtaposing Ruth's ancestral life and the contemporary standpoint of feminism, a new perspective is created that reconstructs the very fabric of Ruth's spirit. Amy Benson Brown affirms this idea when she writes:

Feminist biblical revisionists' overarching redesignation of authority, both wrenching and subtle, is often tied to an awareness of cultural liminality, an interpretive position on the borders between the culturally sanctioned and the unimagined. Such a position gives the writer a critical perspective on the center and forces her to choose a community, a territory, a home.

(12)

Similarly, other poems in this collection make correlations between biblical women and contemporary feminist figures. Bathsheba is compared to Anne Sexton; Lazarus' sister Mary is compared to Sylvia Plath; and Deborah is compared to Simone de Beauvoir. This act of re-vision gives me as the writer, as well as the reader, an ability to "know it [the biblical woman and her story] differently" (On Lies 35). As I wrote, I felt compelled to keep most of the biblical stories parallel with what actually appears in the text with mostly minor but sometimes major changes. However, yielding to my imagination, I approached each story and each woman through a new lens. Amy Benson Brown states: Revisionists' frequent blending of biblical narrative with other literary works, myths, or folklore undercuts the pretension of any story to ahistoric, abstract, or universal truth even as this strategy of collage foregrounds the fact of the text's own construction. (9)

The poems in Begetting the Apple are ultimately a way to see, feel, and know the Bible differently.

Writing these poems was also an opportunity to explore my own spiritual life and Christianity. Having graduated from a Christian liberal arts college with the opportunity to study the Bible intensely for classes like “Old Testament” and “Jesus of Nazareth,” as well as reading the Bible for personal growth, I felt that my biblical knowledge and perspectives warranted a deeper examination in my poetry. As I evolved as a writer, I realized that spiritual-themes were naturally occurring in my writing and when, in my first semester of graduate school, I wrote a poem titled “Noah’s Wife,” telling the story of the wife of the biblical character Noah, it solidified my commitment to writing a collection of poems about women of the Bible. In writing “Noah’s Wife,” I sought to give substance to a woman unnamed and uncharacterized in the Bible. “Noah’s Wife” contemplated her feelings about her husband building an ark in a dry land, giving life and character to this unnamed woman. This poem echoed the same passion that earlier undergraduate poems of mine sought to explore, namely the relationship between Adam and Eve. Women of the Bible had always intrigued me, as a Christian and as a woman. When searching for a topic for my thesis, it seemed natural to intermingle my spiritual life, my interest in women of the Bible, and my poetry. Thus, these poems were born, “Noah’s Wife” being the first.

This collection teeters on the edge of being called “religious” poetry. However, the poems speak beyond being purely religious to create a space and

conversation about the women in the Bible as actual people, not only spiritual examples. Because they already exist within the realm of literature and the written words of the Bible, my poems serve to enliven their literary and figurative lives. It seems imperative to remember that the Bible serves two primary functions: it is the spiritual guide for Christianity and also a crucial selection in the literary canon. This collection, in fact, has very little to do with God, not in betrayal to my beliefs and values, but as an opportunity to explore the lives of these women apart from the somewhat scrutinizing label of “Christianity.” Here, I’ve explored the biblical tradition in light of “the poet’s eye-view,” not necessarily the “believer’s eye-view.” Religious poetry has always had a place in the canon as a longstanding tradition reaching all the way back to Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Donne, and Anne Bradstreet, the first American woman poet to tackle religious poems on Puritan Orthodoxy. Looking back through pages and pages of traditional, canonical texts, the ambition of writing about religion, Christianity or otherwise, is nothing new. Religion, in particular Christianity, has played a large role in the establishment of American culture and American literary tradition. However, I wanted to set my poems apart from the tradition.

In her essay, “The Politics and Poetics of Biblical Revision and Contemporary Women Writers,” Amy Benson Brown explores the idea of “feminist biblical revision,” which she likens to a “jeremiad” or “a biblically based literary genre with its own linguistic conventions” (Brown 4). Brown seeks a correlation between the poetics and politics of feminist biblical revision, the

same impression I have endeavored to evoke in my poems. Poems about women of the Bible offer so many avenues for conversation, be they traditional or radical in approach. They also raise several theoretical, philosophical, and political questions. Brown calls it a questioning of “the very foundations of biblical and literary orthodoxy” (4). It is taking a new approach to an old text, a new way to mix the sacred and the secular. How can biblical women be reinvented and their stories retold to shed new light on their lives, accounts, and characters? How far can the envelope be pushed? The emphasis here is less on religion and more on a humanistic interpretation, talking back to the Bible and reconstructing the cultural context of contemporary interpretation (Brown 4).

Echoing Brown’s sentiment is Alicia Suskin Ostriker, who writes:

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. (212-213)

Ostriker includes a lengthy list of women writers who have done just this: they have taken a myth and made it and remade it their own. These poems remain separate from the “sustaining phallogentric ‘high’ culture” by passing on “female knowledge of female experience,” essentially creating a purely feminist category of revisionist mythmaking that contains “representations of what women find

divine and demonic in themselves” (Ostriker 215). This category, into which my collection should be welcomed, is ever growing and popularized as women writers unselfconsciously reinvent the myths of Sappho, Medusa, Orpheus, and Eve, among others. As Amy Benson Brown writes in her essay, “Last Words: Feminist Biblical Revision and Authority”:

The engagement of biblical texts creates a context through which the woman writer’s authority is articulated. In other words, the central subject of feminist biblical revision is not the Bible. Rather, it is the problems and possibilities of women’s authority in a culture shaped by the masculine hegemony that the Bible has come to represent. (163)

Women of the Bible, a recent hot topic, yields a variety of resources exclusively on these women. However, my thesis is about reinvention—reinvention of the lives of these women, of their identities, and of their paradigms, primarily as they relate to men. As a woman writer, I realize that women-writing-about-women is inherently feminist. It is an opportunity for a woman writer to create for herself her own distinctly female voice and also to reexamine and inevitably reinvent male-dominated language and thought patterns.

As I wrote Begetting the Apple, I took the liberties Brown suggests and the self-reflective perspective of Ostriker. How far could I push my poems to keep them fresh, smart, and appealing? How could I write about figures who are both well-known and unknown to give them real lives, real voices, and link them to contemporary thought and belief? How could I fictionalize real women whose

lives are memorialized in sacred text? How will my poems unlock the divine and demonic in these women? The decisions were not always easy. As I wrote, I wanted to be true to these women and their stories. But, I quickly realized, it is not enough to write lovely lines retelling the stories of historical women. I wanted the poems to be new and full of fresh ideas and perspectives. I wanted to make connections that would transform my readers' understanding of the characters into something radically different.

My intention has always been to take command and authority of the sacred biblical text and put to practice Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-vision," "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Writing 11). As the writer, my authority is based on asking questions relating to feminism, culture, social constructs, history, language, and representation. Rich writes in her essays, "Writing as Re-vision":

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live afresh. (11)

Also, according to Teresa DeLauretis, "construction of gender is the product and the process of both representation and self-representation" (5). Writing a collection of poems about women of the Bible affords the opportunity to look at

contemporary culture, feminist perspectives, ideals, and morals, particularly when placing the “old fashioned” biblical woman in a contemporary situation as in “Hagar and Her Biographer.” In the poem, Hagar meets with the man who will write her biography, he falls in love with her, and they end up in bed together. In writing this poem, I put Hagar in several “contemporary situations”—writing a biography, meeting at a coffee shop, becoming infatuated and sleeping with a stranger—to juxtapose Hagar’s biblical story with daily activities and ideologies that typify modern American life. The poem bounces back and forth between Hagar’s recollections and the modern setting from which she remembers. Hagar is “far from Abram days” and recalling “the life [she] loved” as she and the biographer talk “at the corner diner,/ ...their coffee streaming/into one.” In this way, the biblical story is merely a magnifying glass for examining contemporary life—how we live and have lived, and how we identify and perceive ourselves.

Thus, the question of audience must be raised. Who are my readers, who is my audience, and how do my poems enhance and transform their understanding of women of the Bible? In his essay, “The Poet in an Age of Prose,” Dana Gioia states,

The composition of a poem requires—either consciously or intuitively—the notion of an audience. To create language of requisite precision and intensity, the writer must assume a reader’s specific response to every word, idea, or image. (246)

Gioia continues with an assessment of poets' choices when creating the "notion of an audience":

Since the poet can no longer write assumptively to a diverse audience using a common framework of history, literature, science, myth, and religion, he faces a series of distressing compromises. He can strip his language free of most references and create a kind of minimalist verse that achieves clarity at the expense of comprehensiveness and intensity.

Or... the poet can limit his audience to an educated coterie that still understands the traditional literary codes—a decision that maintains the art's intensity but risks its vitality. (247-8)

Certainly, I had an audience in mind as I chose this topic and wrote these poems. I unabashedly refused to write poems that were "dumbed down" in any way. Not only did I choose a topic that might require my audience to research the biblical woman illuminated in a given poem, I also endeavored to incorporate concepts and ideologies that may require additional research. I wanted to integrate the "history, literature, science, myth, and religion" that Gioia suggests is a high and lofty proposition for the average contemporary reader. My intended audience consists of readers who understand some of the esoteric references, or at least are willing to find the answers. This is not to say that these poems cannot stand alone in their verbal and musical beauty nor that my readers must be members of the academy, only that for their full enjoyment, readers should be willing to draw out the intended meanings and connections that may not be obvious. I want my

audience to interact with the poems and see them as an opportunity to learn something new. As Muriel Rukeyser wrote in her book, The Life of Poetry:

The one difference between the artist and the audience is that the artist has performed upon his experience that work of acknowledging, shaping, and offering which is the creative process. The audience, in receiving the work of art, acknowledges not only its form, but their own experience and the experience of the artist. Both artist and audience create, and both do work on themselves in creating (51-52).

A good poem always teaches the reader something and forces audience participation and, as Rukeyser states, both writer and reader become involved in the creative process.

Beyond the question of audience and understanding is the more salient question of craft. How are these poems written? What poetic elements do they include? The pertinent matters of the aural and visual qualities of poetry create new space and life for each poem. In general, I have focused on certain sound elements of poetry, such as alliteration and assonance, to the exclusion of others, like rhyme. Unlike language poetry where the pursuit of the playfulness of sound in poetry is superior to content, the sounds of the language contained in these poems are subtle and simple. When choosing a vocabulary for my poems, I endeavored to couple alliterative words where I could, giving way to the musicality of the poems without becoming too sing-songy. Word sequences like “undulating/umbrellas,” “knowing that/nobody knows,” and “pressed/into the

pouch of her hand,” are just a handful of examples of the alliterative qualities of these poems. Similarly, the words sequences containing assonance are scattered throughout: “drip/fits,” “highway/spine/reminded,” “eating/leaves.” The vision for these poems is that they would be considerably traditional sounding, not necessarily contemporary or modern in sound or appearance. The language is often elevated slightly, not unlike Gregerson who often uses uncommon words or makes allusions to uncommon knowledge. The intention of these words and sounds is to preserve the mythic quality of the stories to balance their contemporary feel. The contemporization of the poems in terms of content is offset by the traditional sound construction of the lines. The only traditional aural element I have excluded is rhyme. Unlike Carol Ann Duffy’s collections, The World’s Wife and The Feminine Gospels, kindred collections both of which are steeped in internal and end rhymes, I have purposefully disregarded any sense of rhyme scheme.

In addition to the careful crafting of sound, form must be regarded as well. At first glance, the entire collection may be considered to be structurally similar, which is mostly true. As with purposeful rhyme scheme, I have chosen against any sense of predetermined form, sticking mostly to free-verse poems. These are not villanelles, sonnets, limericks, or the like, though some of them do have some semblance of form. For example, in “Deborah: Prophetess, Wife of Lapidot,” the first and third stanzas alternate between left-justified and indented lines:

Rows of torches

unfold her:
 her temperance speaks,
 a torrid tapestry of
 clairvoyance, her counsel
 a tributary of words settling
 the landscape, their
 coruscating clarity.

Tantamount to this pattern are other poems like “Samson’s Bride Dies,”
 “Bathsheba and the King,” and “The Woman at the Well,” whose purpose in form
 served to offset the other strictly free-verse poems that have no prescribed sense
 of form whatsoever. The only other notable exception is “The Wife of Noble
 Character,” a poem divided into several sections, each of which is opened with a
 quoted verse from Proverbs 31. The breaking of the lines in these poems lean
 mostly toward an enjambed line, cutting phrases in half in order to offer
 something unexpected, as in “Adam’s Wife”:

The evening is like a seed under
 the apple tree, a stem
 like a right arm
 reaching for a pen.

Easily, this entire phrase could be two lines that would break after “tree.”
 To add interest and surprise, it becomes four lines each one pushing the image a
 bit further. This is the approach I took throughout the entire collection,

juxtaposing the unexpected line breaks and phraseology with the more traditional sound/language choices.

In order to situate myself within the tradition of women poets reinventing and retelling biblical women's stories, I look closer at the poems of women with whom I am kindred spirits, whose poetry evokes the same sense of play and as do my poems. Here I turn to Linda Gregerson's "Noah's Wife," Jorie Graham's "Eve," and Celia Gilbert's "Eve Leaves Eden." Each poem's unique voice and approach summons the spirit of "feminist biblical revision."

Linda Gregerson's poem entitled "Noah's Wife" is radically dissimilar to the poem I wrote by the same name. Gregerson's writing style is pragmatic and matter-of-fact. She begins from the title, "Noah's Wife,"

is doing her usual for comic relief.

She doesn't

see why she should get on the boat, etc.,

etc., while life as we know it hangs by a thread.

In turn, Gregerson juxtaposes the sensible with elevated language: "tautology" and "pharmacopoeia." When she discusses Noah's wife, she alludes to a "woman's disobedience" and "an obstinate wife," all while weaving in God's voice and the presence of Noah who "is supposed to make it right." Gregerson also positions Noah's wife in the company of Eve at the fall with the repeated

“Who/told you you were naked?” In my poem with the same name, “Noah’s
Wife”

stand[s] dishside, [her] palms
folding into the dirty basin
watching you [Noah] in the front yard
hammering away.

Gregerson’s character similarly is “The housewife//at her laundry tub” and “an unhappy reminder of what/understanding/costs.” However, while my character supports her husband’s crazy antics, Gregerson’s talks back to God’s question, “Who told you//you were food for worms,” by asking, “What/makes you think...//I had to be told?” Regardless of the differences between the two poems, they both give voice to a voiceless, nameless biblical character, rewriting her story and lending her a perspective all of her own. Without being overtly feminist, these poems rewrite the male-construct of Noah’s story. The account in Genesis focuses on Noah and his sons as Noah builds the ark and gathers the animals. Noah’s wife and his sons’ wives are all secondary, seemingly there merely as a means to repopulate the earth. Where the Genesis account offers a male-oriented perspective, the “feminist biblical revision” that focuses primarily on Noah’s wife, *her* thoughts, *her* feelings, and *her* character.

In “Eve,” Jorie Graham creates emotional distance with her use of sparse language and short, simple sentences. She does not approach Eve emotionally nor delve into her psyche; her approach is simple and spare:

Noon: something enters
 and begins, small, hissing *if, oh if...*
 I hear it as it stops.

Mid-noon: listening
 without the push of listening.

Full sun: walls down,
 the wrought-iron gate intact.
 I step through. I step back.

Just now: like a feeling
 behind one's back.

Graham's poem captures the mood surrounding Eve and the Garden of Eden, the somber self-awareness that even parallels the movement of the sun. Because of her focus on mood and the visual elements Eve encounters—"this reflection on the water," "the green," and "the mirror, that exit wound"—the element of narrative is not apparent, though there are glimpses into the story of Eve and Adam, as when Graham writes, "your glance invents for me my glance" and "disordered my clothing,/count my ribs,/hide your face."

Conversely, in her own poem about Eve, Celia Gilbert takes a more traditional approach. Gilbert's "Eve Leaves Eden" gives a straightforward

account of Eve's last steps before leaving the Garden of Eden as she steals a rose to plant in the new garden she would be going to:

The rose that bloomed at the gate
 she stole for a garden of her own,
 a cradle of seeds enclosed within its fullness,
 defying Him the tyrant who
 made the rules to keep them in.

The tone leaves the reader feeling Eve's resentment yet looks on to "her new garden,/[where] the rose flourished along the palings" where she draws upon the rose as a source of power when in the winter "she brewed/the rose hips for nourishment." Unlike the other two poems by Gregerson and Graham, this poem does not mention nor allude to the presence of a man in the poem. Adam is not there. God makes an appearance as does the serpent in the last line, but the poem focuses solely on the female perspective and presence in this biblical story.

Both Graham and Gilbert's perspective on Eve within their individual poems differ from the poem I include in Begetting the Apple entitled, "The Oeuvre of Eve." In this poem, intended to be the opening poem for the collection, Eve addresses Apple's audience directly: "To my dear granddaughters." Eve continues to recount her experience in the garden living with Adam as the first two people on Earth. The poem spring-boarded from the Allen Ginsberg quote from his poem, "Song," that serves as epigraph: "The weight of the world is

love.” The weight that Eve carries is not the burden of sin but the burden of perpetuating love through the generations:

Granddaughters,
 I give to you this weight: not
 the sin the sting
 the burden the blame.

Instead I give mankind
 pressing up on itself,
 the endless slither
 of one generation
 to the next, love.

My hope in focusing on love rather than sin and blame was akin to the rest of the collection and meant to set the framework for the following poems, that is reshaping the common conceptions of these biblical women and retelling their stories in an innovative way.

As I approached my thesis, I looked to these “feminist biblical revisionists” and realized that my poems must not be one-dimensional but should be assertive in voice, clear in tone, and multifarious in terms of character and setting. Obviously, the stark contrasts between Gregerson, Graham, and Gilbert’s styles offered me the confidence to take risks with my poems, to explore new perspectives and combinations of ideas, to realize the limitless opportunities I could explore. Decision-making became of utmost importance in this endeavor.

In choosing the characters I would write about, I was not able to include every woman mentioned in the Bible, only about twenty-six, which gave me more opportunity to ruminate and concentrate on only those few characters. It was not my intent to purposely exclude any “important” women but chose the ones that struck me as most interesting to learn about or re-envision. I reread their stories from the Bible, consulted other scholarly perspectives primarily via the Internet, and then invented the rest. In my invention, I realized a certain balance had to be struck to maintain the integrity of the stories and characters while at the same time adding new, contemporary elements. Here, I am reminded of the essay, “Writing Off the Subject,” by Richard Hugo. Hugo states:

A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem or “causes” the poem to be written, and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing. (4)

For each of the poems in my collection, with the exception of the personal “aside” poems scattered throughout the collection, the triggering subject was the woman of the Bible: Eve, Mary, Ruth, etc. In order to stir up the real/generated subject in each poem, I took liberty to lie unabashedly, to create, invent, and be true to the poem. Hugo writes, “Don’t be afraid to jump ahead...Make the subject of the next sentence different from the subject of the sentence you just put down.

Depend on rhythm, tonality, and the music of language to hold things together” (4-5). By incorporating Hugo’s idea of subjects and Internet research I routinely

used to enhance my poems, each poem evolved into its own unique perspective. “The Oeuvre of Eve” is traditional in approach, style, and language, while “September” is more personally introspective and less about Sarah, the triggering subject. “Lover to Beloved” is a found poem from the book, *Song of Solomon*, while “Ruth” and “Mary and Lazarus” incorporate contemporary literary figures. Each poem is stylistically unique, yet each poem in the collection works to balance the others: the traditional and the radical, the quiet and the brash.

In reflecting on Gregerson, Graham, and Gilbert’s biblical woman poems, I realized that they, the poets, were not personally interactive with the audience. Their personal voices were not evident in the poems, though each poem’s voice was confident in its own narrative presence. In writing *Begetting the Apple*, I realized that as a Christian woman, my voice and myself ought to be evident within the collection. In rereading Anne Sexton’s *Transformations*, I realized that Sexton’s readers encounter an intense connection with the narrator, who is Sexton herself. She begins her collection with an affirmation that she is, indeed, the narrator, the speaker, the reteller of the poems:

The speaker in this case
 is a middle-aged witch, me—
 tangled on my two great arms,
 my face in a book
 and my mouth wide,
 ready to tell you a story or two. (Sexton 223)

The poems continuously echo and remind the reader that Sexton is there. The tone of the poems is consistent throughout the collection, giving the reader a grasp on Sexton's personal voice despite the fact that her experiences are not the foremost topic of the collection. As I wrote my collection, I too labored to keep the tone and voice consistent throughout, though myself as the narrator is not as prominent as in Transformations. Most of the poems in Begetting the Apple did not lend themselves readily to my personal vocalizations, though I did allow for some glimpses into my personal life permitting myself become characterized in some poems such as "September," where I recount a trip to Portland, Oregon with my new husband after moving from New York to Alabama:

We vacuum and eat our sausage and broccoli,
 talking of our short trip to Portland,
 the bridges the mountain and
 kissing in Powell's bookstore
 before you went to history and I
 turned to poetry...

And now as I walk our Alabama home, I am filled
 with the desert filings of Sarah,
 her courage in tow, the Xerophytes nod and I
 see her always a few steps ahead.

Here, I recall our trip and take the opportunity to talk to Sarah, pondering her character and desiring her courage for my own. I also examine feeling "less/lucid

each day” and my “ineffable hunger for home.” Other poems like “A Wife of Noble Character” give me the opportunity to suggest a similarity between my mother and myself:

One way to pass the time:
 wake for work each day,
 each another glance
 at the mirror, another shock
 of her face in mine.

Though these hints and glances into my personal life are few, I used them as an opportunity to situate myself among my biblical foremothers, to explore myself as a woman of faith, and to see how I stack up against these frontrunners. It was also an opportunity to incorporate a “confessional force” into this collection, a return to the self-aware ruminations of my real and (sometimes) invented experiences.

The apex of this confessional force exhibits itself in the most daunting and personal of all my poems, “Adam’s Wife,” the final poem in the collection. Here, I offer a glimpse into my relationship with my husband, Adam, while suggesting that I am in some ways like Eve and other biblical granddames:

If you were to say
 that my biblical mothers are showing,
 the tautology is mistranscribed in me,
 the traffic turns me to monster,

I would say:

I am Adam's wife,

our ribs are diaphanous spinal rings,

our invention, we listened and

the grandmothers spoke up,

even now

the green edges

curl in on us while we sleep.

With this poem, I revisit the relationship introduced in “An Adam of My Own,” the second poem of Apple and bookend the collection with a proclamation that “I am Adam's wife,” a statement meant to complement the opening poem, “The Oeuvre of Eve.” In “Oeuvre,” Eve speaks directly to her “dear granddaughters,” and this final poem responds with “we listened.”

The women of the Bible have served to inspire and enliven my thesis, and this collection is but an attempt to pay homage to those biblical mothers. Writing these poems has offered me as a writer an opportunity to stretch, grow, and evolve as a poet, a thinker, and a Christian. In my research, I did not once encounter a collection of poems quite like these, bound up all together and offered as a whole. The “success” of these poems is determined only in their ability to inspire; their gravity found in the combination of language, music, and story. So I offer

Begetting the Apple in hopes that my passion and creativity equate to inspiration,
both human and divine.

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I.
Old Testament

The Oeuvre of Eve

"The weight of the world is love."
-Allen Ginsberg

To my dear granddaughters,

Your faces are the roses:

Floribunda,

Grandiflora:

you, prudent, your petals
 waving quixotic, your inflorescence
 electric: your stems grow
 like ribs from the dust.

Who told you that you were naked?

As my hair
 overflowed my breast, what
 fig leaves and flesh
 could not cover,
 my companion, my love,
 my Adam fastened
 his hand to mine and
 we left our garden, our home:
 here, we have the daily
 groundwork, the gleaning,
 the lovemaking, us making
 love, making
 the meaning of love is us:

we lay, intimate in the roses,
our bodies exposed, the only
two people on earth,
the garden, the swirl of
dust and bone:

Adam's words:

*This is now bone
of my bones and flesh
of my flesh; she
shall be called 'Woman,'
for she was taken
out of Man.*

Granddaughters,
I give to you too this weight: not
the sin the sting
the burden the blame.
Instead I give mankind
pressing upon itself,
the endless slither
of one generation
to the next, love.

An Adam of My Own

After Eve's turn at the fruit, I took mine and
found an Adam of my own—

hair yet flaxen and biceps like carved stone, I
cut his hair and offered osculation—

geometry favored over a trillion stars, we
counted them all, connected their crowns—

Polaris, our didactic defender, its treatise
traces the gospels back our way.

Noah's Wife

When you told me
the rains were coming,
I sewed my fear
into my skin
with dissolvable thread,
flesh sticky, weighing thimbles
with rough hands,
licking stamps for kisses,
hollow bed.

Here I stand dishside, my palms
folding into the dirty basin,
watching you in the front yard
hammering away.

You've never built a boat before.
You've been a professor of philosophy
for many years—your beard at your knee,
your face tucked like a fossil
into Kierkegaard, days spent
at the university, under umbrella trees,
French tongues enticing young minds
with their existential dilemmas. Noah,
is this yours?

Our children are full-grown:
impudent, suave, serene:

they fill themselves like oil lanterns while
I spend my days flushing
canvases with paint and
soaping your oxford shirts
in the creekbend
behind the house.

You say the rains are coming and
the violet fog blurring
the earth will disappear soon.
I stand before the hall mirror,
check the scar on my side—
boat-shaped, glossy
like the varnish you used
to seal the ark—
the big boat that will launch us
through rains and days
of waiting for oak leaves and
olive branches.

And the day I die,
having heard the world's last
drowning breath,
I will wear a white gown,
sheer like the curtains in
the front room, hemmed
with the ghosts of those
who passed us as they slid
like hands over thighs

into heaven.

Hagar and Her Biographer

However brief
the sit-down in the biographer's office,
the leather rounding beneath them,
one woman's life of pages,
the biographer adjusted his glasses,
lifted his chest.

Hagar,
her yellow hands, origami swans,
little triangle folds
of her eyes, far from Abram days,
she heard he changed his name

but the biographer didn't care,
watched Hagar's lips
suck air in, exhale, exhale,
Shall we meet again?

Delicate as a woman's muscle
sewn to tendon, bone of her timbre.
God doesn't say
anything and a whole life is
a yellow curtain in
a yellow room.

It's like screwing someone's husband.

And when the biographer suggested
 they meet at the corner diner,
 she smelled of Christmas and he
 imagined her bones floating
 downriver: *Where was*
the life you loved?
 he asked, their coffee steam streaming
 to one. Hagar's reply:
The desert.

Their voices blurred into hours,
 a simple gesture, a bucket of glances,
 he learned her favorite colors,
 memorized her movements, and spilled into her
 in her garret apartment
 at the end of it all,
 prolonging the prolix, attending her moons
 circling as she slept:

They are feeling their way
 out into the night,
 the audible sweep of nightbirds and
 the half-life of sponges
 and stars, the knowing that
 nobody knows, the desert landscape
 undertow, a backpack of
 gypsies scarved, their draperies
 feeding on canvas pockets as
 violet-eye circles form

the familiar aperture of frames.

Across the continent,

Hager screws Sarai's husband.

She has the map of an ersatz mother,
under the blue lid of sky, not even the birds
echo this mating dance, the fierce wires
of a substitute bride, maidservant, whore.

And days later, within her,

the lines repeat

and repeat

into a thumbprint of

Ishmael.

Sarah

Like an outstretched hand,
the glassed-in wave confirming
there is farther to go.

Somehow she has joined me
her eyes like two blue tortoises
unfolding my grumbles:

It was Sarah whose desert haze
was like the skin of her heel,
jagged and tender, leather-strapped:

How many steps have we to go?

She was called a sister
to her husband, cloaked in thorn,
the gentle glide through trepidation:

Is this issue of providence?

And Sarah, her bell-voice reflecting
the stained-glass wishes of a child-
less woman, hair grayed
with only a promise to look after, until
as an old wife making love
to her sweet seasoned Abraham,
tiny cells circle back
like years of waiting:

All I've waited for.

The Travail of Sarah

All it is is
one more twisted thorn and then
he'll be here

like the desert mornings
the sun rises also
closes its eyes and opens them

like this is the first time
to open them and
the midwife's gray face shouts:

He's here.

With your back stretched
your front like yeast-less dough
you see his face:

prune of first lung
the inflorescent bairn:

this is Isaac, son of
Sarah.

Sarah, mother,
now mother and
at once
in half-time her

one hundred and twenty-
seven moons, in ten thousand
desert steps,

 the sparrow carries
berries and worms and
nests all its young
 in her curls.

September

Everything's strange here,
three months wedded, we re-face north,
the ineffable hunger for home,
while outside love-bugs make love everywhere
and come inside the porch to die,
their red-dot bodies pile on the carpet,
and we vacuum and eat our sausage and broccoli,
talking of our short trip to Portland,
the bridges the mountain and
kissing in Powell's bookstore
before you went to history and I
turned to poetry.

Like your grandmother at the kitchen table, I am
less lucid each day, sipping my coffee, staring
through the city I left as I jot down a message
from an old friend. The afternoons
shorten. Autumn's dirge explodes.

And now as I walk our Alabama home, I am filled
with the desert filings of Sarah,
her courage in tow, the Xerophytes nod and I
see her always a few steps ahead,
sand in her hair, sweat candid on her upper lip—
she does not know when these days will end,
when the weather will turn or when she will die.

She does not know how the days turn gray,
just that they do.

Deborah: Prophetess, Wife of Lapidot

Rows of torches
 unfold her:
 her temperance speaks,
 a torrid tapestry of
 clairvoyance, her counsel
 a tributary of words settling
 the landscape, their
 coruscating clarity.

Dibberah,

Lapidot-woman:

She is called judge,
 prophetess,
 priestess.

And if I know her wholly,
 her prudent flames,
 and if I know the wisdom of
 ten thousand soldiers,
 their lengthened wings,
 my judgment too
 will erupt like European
 existentialism:

so much more

*than Simone's fondness
 for Sartre,*

so much more
a warrior woman wise
in battle, her armor of
elegance, she extends
a graceful whim
to the will
of man.

Samson's Bride Dies

Late June carries a white sheet
to the bride, her hands
protean, a sieve awaiting water,
a belly full of bees,

a riddled rope of hair. Her back
smoothes against the
stained-glass windows of the sanctuary,
lilies climb the aisle,

peeling whispers, peeling prayers
from the walls. This altar
of sometimes and never, prolonged
engagements, the vows

of others, rolling onto conventional seams,
the bride places her veil
like a crown and rehearses: *I do*.
The words stain her lips,

like honey they slide from her mouth,
her cavern of kisses,
they echo through the pews, absorbed by
the back wall of the church.

At home, Samson, the bridegroom,
hair streaming, fires up

the grill, the coals kindle as the sun
hems the earth, slinking flame.

The women light their cigarettes and
boast their little leaguers;
the men swallow their beers like seltzer
from the Fountain of Youth,

they goad each other with who is the bravest,
the smartest, the strongest,
the sexiest? A riddle will solve this! So Samson
wagers and riddles the men while

the bride goes to bed. Her nightdress white
linen bedsheets: She sleeps
alone, her cathedral unlocked, hands
in a ball. The morning spells

her name in rose petals on the altar.
She is the bride.
And even after the ashes sigh, her voice
riddles the sunlight,

those tiny betrayals flicker the earth.
Even after the settling
and unsettling, the burning and the crowing,
her hands still untangle his mane.

He, her lion-tamer, her beloved,

founder of foxholes and fire.

These words still resound on her grave:

Honey on the tongue, gall in the heart.

Delilah and Samson

All these open nights,
my body is a salient,
an orchard.

I weave my limbs
into theirs, these men
whose midnight faces
undulate as hand to shoulder,
stomach, thigh: they
ask for me by name,
Delilah.

And, this Samson who lies
with me like a lion, fashioned me
into his ocelot, he who calls me
beloved: my greed dilutes us.
Enticed to betray you, these
eleven hundred shekels are mine:

*Tell me the secret
of your great strength
and how you can be tied up
and subdued.*

Now these bowstrings
snap us like Aurignacian adversaries:
one arrow slices

the next, cumulating
passion and perjury,
our bedsheets are
counted with threads
of lies.

The sun sneaks in
to rouse us:
my desiccated heart
hesitates, doubts you,
your frugal ambition,
this morning,
the length of the floor
covers your hair,
my faithful razor in hand,
the sting of skin
against skin, metal against
mettle, dear
swindled strength.

The Governess Speaks

Still intact, the miles of vine and root,
the grooming of the terrace, prying loose my hair—
this aside to our daily lives.

However quickly I simmer
through the Earl Grey morning,
my fingers in books,
yours on stone.

Next, I step into the schoolyard
for the first time each day and revisit
the late-night fury of early poems, killing
the kitchen, examining my breasts
as they bud, before
I had a voice or knew the difference between
ossuary, garden, or coil.

I visited my godmother in a book:

How like a hiss
is my voice against these
children's faces, scripting
the grammar-filled sunrise, even as
I turn another page or memor(ial)ize
Ruth's verse.

Ruth

Happenstance, Ruth,
your *Entreat me not*
to leave you will carry.

Oh, lovely tendril
of a widow, you are
a Friedanian foremother,
a housewife unbuckled,
returned to the widow-in-law
who gathered you.

Did you choose another
husband, a new landmark,
a time machine? No—nothing
but Naomi and gleaning
the fields, sliding your hand
along the wheat, threshing
the sheaves.

Ruth, autonomic ancestress,
industrious in the harvest,
carefully weaving the stooks—
how far we've come from conventional
femininity, how far
we've found our hands
soaped and sanctioned,
enveloped with clout,
how far, how far we've come.

Happenstance, Ruth, your biography,
your mystique, across acres of land:

My body is a house, like a steel
frame, my family is a body like muscle
fastened to bone, joints and anchors
and husbands, the work, the field, children:

*Entreat me not
to leave you.*

Bathsheba and the King

In the hour of bathing, Bathsheba
 undresses herself,
 pallor of flesh.

She is a long yellow stem
 still pink
between the legs, dropping
 her robe
from her shoulder,
 a little light scurries
across the courtyard,
 the birds clap above.

She listens to the world wrinkle,
 its noiseless pulse
unfolding like a single
 drop of blood in the ocean,
but she didn't see
 her own reflection when she
looked into
 the pool.

There the king stands
 atop the roof, adores
the fatness of her upper arm, marmalade
 of back
and Bathsheba wishes for

a beer or a glass of Shiraz to slosh,
to glaze this temptation with glances,
tempting the fury of
drunk love.

No one knows really what she thinks
of him,
crow on the roof, the wind blows,
seeds diffuse.

It's spring somewhere
in the eastern hemisphere,
and Bathsheba is summoned
to his chamber.

She lays on a bed where many
queens have laid,
her breasts unadorned, legs open,
she clutches King David's cock
and thinks of her husband
at the city gate, his hands
clutching a weapon of destruction.

Bathsheba, Wife of David

Seraphic, this queen sits
under a thunder-rolled highway
of dead husbands and sons.
The strain of scenery
crooks her neck and spine.

Suddenly, she is reminded of
her mother's hands,
always steadily sewing or
cooking Bifteck Saute au Beurre,
Potage Parmentier, or
something invented in trial
and error. Her mother's hands were
always tidy, groomed jewel-
perfect fingers
like opalescent canteens.

But Bathsheba's
hands are dull carrots,
David's pride,
and though she loves
him with the love of a thousand bijoux,
her mother's voice
sticks to her mind like
the title page of
Anne Sexton's first book:

to Kayo who waited, who endured Bedlam:

What kind of love
sits idle on the throne
when there is tenderizing
and sweeping
to be done?

Bathsheba, Mother

They say a rich man
with a thousand sheep
wouldn't spare one ewe
 for you,
Bathsheba, as you
lay beside David
waking from the death-
sleep of your bantling,
laid beneath the grass,
the sheep-tread above.

The birth of a seven-day child
 like the doctor's love poem
he never showed his wife,
after five nights searching
for the right word and then
on day five,
 the cough of death,
mid-sentence over roast beef,
carrots and potatoes, she absconds.

But tonight in your
glass-blown uterus
a new king forms
like the second letter
of the Greek alphabet,
the isomeric variation

of you and David,
all countenance and
counted smiles:

Solomon, Solomon, Solomon.

Death of Jezebel

The spark in the paper house:
Jezebel, the darling of Baal,
waits by the window for death:

Not long at the basin or carving the wall,
she painted her eyes and lips:

The starry-light virago reads aloud,
libertine lips parted, her mind blurs
into a tabloid of ritual sex and
slaughter, the Japanese Maple burning,
the castigation of Naboth.

Surely it isn't without warning,
she slips from the window
with the slough of evening fixed
against the clay, the terra of her skin
glowing, she is suddenly
translucent, a stratum of herself,
the loosened pith, face slate.

Dogs suck her bones dry
and the pages are just paper,
smoking her name through the night sky,
the skim floats upward through claret
stiff within the wineskins.

A Wife of Noble Character

*Who can find a virtuous woman?
for her price is far above rubies:*

The hours swinging over
my chest, undulating,
umbrellas of bodies,
hallowed shells,
grapes without their skins.

How awkward the white—
our eyes, oyster shells—
poised, the eyes of God
eyeing us, how awkward

these reds—the stain
in the bed and roses
turn into rubies, vitreous,
luminescent stems:
a wife is made not born.

And they gather her
in her white, she blooms red,
her chromatic scales etched
into a notebook that
reads like an apophthegm,
a daffodil, apologies & instructions,
a proverb, a promise,

platinum, sapphire, rust.

She sets about her work vigorously;
 her arms are strong for her tasks:

“This is a labor of love,” she says,
 rolling and unrolling the mud,
 years spread out and folded
 like one hundred love sonnets,
 some read, some unread:

*Asì establecidas mis razones
 de amor te entrego esta
 centuria:*

Matilde, you triumphant minx,
 one hundred years to give
 one husband, one love,
 leaning across the table
 to kiss you.

*She sees that her trading is profitable,
 and her lamp does not go out at night.*

One way to pass the time:
 wake for work each day,
 each another glance

at the mirror, another shock
of her face in mine.

I hurry away
and this approximate mien
stiffens within moments.
After watering the daffodils, I
come in to put on shoes.

The work goes on:
writing more poems,
whispering more prayers,
lengthening the lines until
my breath is like a slow wind
lifting the curtain and
lowering it.

*She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.*

Open the window,
she has more to say:

a penny for your company,
a thought for your shoes:

these shored-up tulips
embrace each other:

and she is clothed with strength
and dignity and

she digs into the dirt
to find a brown box:

wool, flax, vineyards,
arms, gates, bread:

her shadow extends
across the lawn:

return me here when I'm done.

*Many women do noble things
but you surpass them all:*

And I find myself
with no score to keep and
a mouthful of wifely verbs:

And all the wives, all the
women rise, their sequined eyes,
their rubies, unmarked constellations,
their hands are maps,
where the water meets land
and

I am here
in my husband's rough hands,
brick to brick,
north to south,
hand to hand.

Lover to Beloved*an excerpt from Song of Songs*

A flock of sheep just shorn, coming up
from the washing, each
has its twin, not one of them
is alone.

II.
New Testament

Mary and Elizabeth

The stars acrostically
 shuffle the sky

and a gravid Elizabeth,
 basket of child at her waist,
 new moon overhead,
 on her front porch rocker
 she keeps time with the stars
 and a cross-stitch at her hand.

The cosmos sift into Mary's belly:
 her insides clustered with
 a Pleiades grandeur,
 her metra crowded
 with Seven Sisters, guardians of
 God's artwork.

Mary, hurried to Judea, steps
 into Elizabeth's kitchen,
 tread long balancing
 her meticulously weighted middle.

This day, an anchor, the wheel
 turning, a song spins from
 Elizabeth's mouth like a thread.

These parturient silhouettes
 glaze the windowsill and
 these easy days

roll into three months
 of song, of pearl woven
into pearl, of two women
 sitting, singing;
from the mollusk
 two little boys wait, nascent,
clamming in pools of amnion,
 gospels to be written
from the carriage, the mothers'
 starry breasts full.

The Women of Herod

I. Herodias' Daughter, Salomé

Locks, prisons, a mouthful of beans,
 no one came to his head to serve it,
 none danced before him, golden sashes,
 light shifts, breast bellows:

John imprisoned,
 the tetrarch stares. This is the daughter of
 the wife of his brother, a strangling ribbon.

Not for years and months of
 wants and wants not,
 of moths and rubescence
 of make believe,

not for these but
 only for one lexicon dribbling
 from the mouths of rulers,
 the overflowing peritoneum:

Salomé,
 the dance of seven veils, she dances.

Inanna passes through the seven gates of hell;
 Salomé's body like a hook, an urban legend.

II. Herodias

Summary:

Only Flaubert
 could animate a tragedy
 like this, the sexual politics,
 the flexing, bending stem,
 philosophies that a man
 is like a diadem worn
 then tossed aside,
 his fleshy tongue, clumsy gait,
 from sternum to belly button
 (they're all the same)—

And you, Herodias,
 loathe and dandelion, you
 queened yourself, you
 left Philip for Herod, one seed
 for another, and anchored
 into the royal seat.

Outline:

Herodias today,
 Herodias tomorrow,
 her face spirals in,

she lives out her years
 like a prinker,
 parading in her best dress,

her magnificence, her
 resolve, who is it that

worries her?

—John the Baptist,
jailed adversary,
his incessant wailing riles her?

Oh, Herodias,
today tomorrow forever,
mind your daughter's dance,

her laurel unrolls and
your Herod is a fish,
Salomé swims beside him,

a fleshy braid,
retaining wall,
no one really knows

how does the body stretch
with its frames
and porches, photographs

of the little girl
whose nakedness
repeals your own,

who given three wishes,
a bag of magic beans,
or a fairy godmother,

could bring you, her royal mother,
John's head
on your wedding plate.

The Funeral Procession

She watches her son's cruor and weeps,
 he is depleted in cough, the bed
 rolls around him, he rocks,
 hands over hand over head.

The widow-mother's deluge
 imbibes her night. Her trepidation
 grows teeth and if
 she was a dowager, the price of
 milk and medication wouldn't
 pendulate so.

Her blanket would warm her and
 her son's nocturnal croup
 wouldn't stir.

And on the bluest Thursday of
 the tenth month, the doctor
 prognosticated death
 to the little boy,
 his marble eyes, iron teeth—
 A little cough and then—

 between
 chapel and charnel:
 pallbearer's fists
 bends, the weight of a
 little body in a box,
 the townspeople flock

like a Nain freshet,
bursting.

The mother's face obsidian to
the passerby who commands the boy:

Rise

and

Here is your son.

Persephone's pomegranate drips,
its saccharine, sweats, bleeds.

She stands above

the child's bed,

notes his curve of nose,

and drapes another blanket over him.

Her tutelage vernal;

he lies comfortably.

Alabaster Jar

Everything happens at once.
 The world is a pit of April and I
 chase a blue ribbon across town
 to the foot, the feet—

The stem of day leans against me,
 its elegant element,
 a diamond sharp for a child
 of riches, another of welfare,
 a social sheath, a vesicle, obsidian
 archetype—so it is
 with me.

I am
 the town harlot,
 a woman unclean.

So it is.

Everything
 happens at once
 and all these bodies move,
 crooked sleeves of bodies, like mine
 diffracting others, the flinch of night,
 the tuck of bedsheets, silhouettes hammering,
 the TV prowls—I suppose
 these are the ingredients.

This is my season.

And suddenly, at a table in town,
the Lord eats, and
I present
my *alabastrum unguenti*,
my alabaster jar.

A spindle of tinder, thread
of transgression, his foot
stretches and this
solid oak consecration
slips balm from hair
to foot,
hand to jar.

Martha Distracted

Ah, dear Martha, your pillow is his heart:

his syntax, your envelope:

don't be fooled.

You fetter, blaming your sister for her absolution,

her resolve, her residence,

while you bustle.

Who will prepare the supper...

your life slips on the soapy floor.

Mary Sits

Auscultating at his feet, the diagnosis is

stillness.

Her porcelain echoes the sun.

The afternoon like a caesura
stretches the sunlight.

Mary sits.

Like a placid planet,
her oceans
rise and fall,
their eupnea
elected to the
Lord's metre.

The Woman at the Well

The sun spills the scenery and her face aches with
a stretch in her abdomen, the fist of
five errant steps, but the well does not convict her.

While her five husbands appraise the earth, she
fetches the water, her arms balancing
like lady justice; she stops to rest.

Like the queen bee, mounted drone by drone,
she is the Wife of Bath, a veritable Dr. Ruth:
eventually what all women want is prerogative,

a husband who knows his wife's good judgment,
that she is a sultana, an asylum, the author
of *Sex for Dummies*, and a dummy herself.

At the well she waits alone for a fairy godmother,
this well water, a messiah to approach her
who will throw his bucket into the well or give her
a reason to turn home, a promise
that one man, one
is enough.

Mary, Sister of Lazarus

Mary's happiness
 is a November day, the daylight
 shortens, words echo where
 the sunlight can't touch,
 its angle against the earth, lifting and
 lowering like frostbite
 over flame.

And like November,
 Lazarus, brother of Mary
 and Martha, his days
 diminish and
 — *Lord, the one you love*
 is sick
 — *This sickness will not*
 end in death.

Mary, out ahead of you
 the orange-red glows and
 softens the skyline, the rough edges
 of earth, and the children are eating
 crabapples and caramel and
 the burnt leaves' aroma shifts to
 Lazarus, age 5,
 in the backyard tossing leaf piles up
 in the air and the boyhood squeals,
 those crisp helicopters tumbling

low to the copper earthen ground
and you and Martha
in wool-weathered sweaters,
sticks and char-smell plaited
into your curls,
the sun setting pink.

Mary, now your Lazarus
lies dead.

How do these days end, Mary,
Lady Lazarus?

Even Sylvia's words
couldn't resurrect her
from death, a death her hand turned
over, her secrets' long fingers,
her husband's chin.

Oh, sure
the book only has 352 pages,
but I read every one
searching for a trace of
her red hair,
knowing the poem is
like falling in love,
knowing that the curve of

her browbone was like Mary's,
knowing the cities she etched
with words, the ashes, knowing,
knowing that once you
lay your lilies in her name
the grave reaches back
to the sun that kisses
the stone.

Magdalene at the Tomb

Rather than pulling weeds,
mulling the ergonomics
of fertilized lawn, Mary
approaches the garden tomb.

The early morning of
the first day of the week and the sun's
climb is gradual like Mary's morning
footsteps, her garment sweeping
the cedar floor, remembering her
seven demons' shudder, the paintings
of dogs and wives. Her body is
more and more like a canvas
each day since his death.

The sun-construct
like a watercolor drip
fits only within the garden bounds.
Mary's tears are coins pressed
into the pouch of her hand, her hands
like saucers reach for the gardener,
she asks
where is he and he says her name
Mary
like fire lifting the sky.

Jezebel in Revelation

From the far star of the world,
the warning to a fly in the mouth,
don't suck too hard, she's not far
from here and her élan is like
the rows of pecan trees she stands
beneath, sturdy as they are shaken
down, the viscous, nutty air suspending
her body just above the ground.

But Thyatira is not the South
and Jezebel here is anthologized:
one king, one, two, revelation,
she is hanging her laundry on the line,
hair spun like the curve of swan.

In Thyatira, she is
granite and this temple
is filled with dirty vittles,
sex-sins, idols,
her children are porphyrious stems
laid in beds of wax and she
is standing in a glass room
with a glass floor, gazing
through the ceiling.

III.
Adam's Wife

Adam's Wife

Broken rib: I gather laundry and Adam
reads the sports section—
Mets won, Braves lost.

The evening is like a seed under
the apple tree, a stem
like a right arm
reaching for a pen.

The poems of the year
all shovel away, slither in the heat,
the puzzle-South bumping us
against each other

and if you were to say
that my biblical mothers are showing,
the tautology is mistranscribed in me,
the traffic turns me to monster,

I would say:
I am Adam's wife,
our ribs are diaphanous spinal rings,
our invention, we listened and
the grandmothers spoke up,
even now
the green edges
curl in on us while we sleep.