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The University of Southern Mississippi

Bildungsroman

by

Mary Spooner

A Thesis
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Approved by

Angela Ball, Ph.D., Thesis Advisor
Professor of English

Luis Iglesias, Ph.D., Chair,
Department of English

Ellen Weinauer, Ph.D., Dean
Honors College

Abstract

Bildungsroman is an original collection of poems exploring issues of womanhood, relationships, motherhood, and growth. The majority of poems in this collection are written in free verse; however, the collection also includes several formal poems. *Bildungsroman* is accompanied by a critical preface.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Angela Ball for mentoring me, supporting me, and above all, for being patient. I would also like to thank the faculty of the Honors College for always encouraging me. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for having confidence in me when I needed it most.

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Preface

Foundation

When I was a child my father told me stories of his childhood on a farm in George County, Mississippi. The contrast between my father's childhood and my own has always fascinated me. Activity and necessity were never so closely linked for me as they were for my father. I imagined him carrying sacks of flour over his seven-year-old shoulders, watching his grandfather slaughter the pigs he'd once petted, and shooting squirrels and rabbits, his hunting dog faithfully by his side. I was enticed by his accounts of even the most menial tasks: hulling peas, peeling sugarcane and potatoes. When we visited my great uncle, he would pull the husk of sugarcane away with a bone knife and offer me the sweet pulp. In our suburban apartment my father taught me how to use a short, sharp knife to peel apples. He showed me how to hold the knife and fruit, dig into the skin delicately, and inch my thumb in front of the blade to coax it along as I peeled. In my family, there seemed to me a constant value of paring down or stripping away of the unnecessary.

I did not begin writing poetry— at least with a degree of discipline— until college. This collection is not only a reflection of my growth as a poet but also a reflection of my maturation as a person. For me, poetry is an act of self-discovery, and the idea of paring or culling facilitates that discovery. At first, writing poetry overwhelmed me. I had an entire language and infinite subject matter at my disposal, and this realization was crippling. Having written little before, I considered each poem and each decision a permanent statement of preference about my style or values. Once in a

workshop setting, I recognized this perspective was immobilizing. After accepting that I was not obligated to encapsulate my entire identity or understanding of the world in each poem, I aimed to focus on issues I found interesting or important: gender, family, relationships, childhood. As I culled these issues of personal importance, I simultaneously identified and exposed them to myself. My poetry is personal, both a conscious and unconscious reflection of my perception and values. The development of artistic and personal identity is a symbiotic process, each begetting and benefitting the other.

Approach

For me, poetry is synthesis. Poetry is a means of internalizing relationships and experiences. As a woman and daughter, I look to childhood, relationships, girl/womanhood, and motherhood in order to understand myself, the world around me, and how they relate to one another.

My father's grandmother would peel fruit and vegetables the same way he taught me: removing as much peel and as little of the rest as possible. She threw potato skins out to the pigs, but she kept the apple peels. She would put them in a saucepan with butter and sugar, cook them down, and make a warm apple syrup. I aim to use language in the same way. Stylistically, I favor concision. I want to communicate directly and use accessible rhetoric that is easy to understand. My poems are generally short, consisting of short lines and direct language. I am interested in stripping away language that adds weight or does not contribute to meaning. I want what language I use to do as much work for me as possible, and I try to establish a sense of balance to allow for it. I focus on

selecting words that are dense in meaning or connotation so I can afford to minimize their volume.

I find myself seeking a strong relationship between form and meaning. The short, choppy lines in “Things My Mother Tells Me About The Parking Lot” attempt to embody the frantic feeling a woman has when walking to her car alone in a parking lot. The first few sentences are terse and carefully punctuated: “Walk/ with persistence/ but not far./ you should park close.” As the poem progresses, however, run-on sentences replace them, speeding the poem up and mimicking the quickening of a woman’s step. The capitalization is also irregular. The verbal commands, “Walk,” “Scan,” “Grasp,” “Survey,” “Ignore,” “Run,” “Drive,” and “Know” are capitalized, emphasizing the imperative, allowing the capitalized words to stand alone as a condensed string of commands if read separately. These commands push the poem forward only to meet a dead end: “Drive in a circle/so you/ Know.” The act of knowing marks the end of action, and thus does nothing to prevent danger, creating a feeling of dissatisfaction and vulnerability. In “Bildungsroman” the form also plays with rhythm. The list form gives the poem a quick, continuous rhythm, firing images almost in a blur, mimicking memory. The poem builds toward the last image, “That shallow goldfish grave,” a punctuating moment symbolizing the departure of innocence.

Many of my poems explore memories and relationships from childhood and young adulthood for larger truths or implications. This process parallels growing up, that requires us to continuously derive meaning from experience— yet a person’s first understanding of an experience seldom lasts, as she revisits experiences at every age. In my collection I frequently revisit memories, many of my own or based on my own, and

synthesize or reorganize them to convey new meaning. The sonnet “Pigeon” revisits a memory of finding an injured pigeon. The three quatrains describe the memory from the child’s point of view, and the couplet processes it from a new perspective. The third quatrain ends: “from calloused hands the pigeon flies away / Above the pines beyond the wood line.” The couplet introduces the newly assigned truth, the “*snap*” of the bird’s neck, stripping away the child’s naïveté and rendering the previous memories and understandings obsolete. “Peeling Cane” revisits a memory more subtly, describing a scene without explicitly revising it. Instead, the speaker’s narrative exposes a disconnect between the grandfather’s perception of the experience and the young girl’s. The grandfather’s hands are “slow, each time slower” while the girl’s legs are “long, each time longer,” as both grow older. The girl “has not yet learned/ to chew slowly” and savor the taste of the sugar cane, but the grandfather chews slowly until the taste fades away, recognizing the experience as a future memory.

My poems sometimes serve as critical commentary, particularly on the issue of gender.

By examining girlhood, motherhood, and relationships, my poetry seeks to expose the artificial or constructed. “Solomon’s Temple” is a personal poem that attempts to deconstruct the expectation of virginity. The poem revisits the flexible metaphor “your body is a temple.” In my religious education adults used this saying to encourage purity; however, I quickly observed how this standard was applied more stringently to women. Loss of purity for girls marked a spoilage of moral character, whereas in boys, this loss was frequently viewed as a misstep. The goal of “Solomon’s Temple” is not to directly

refute the metaphor but, instead, to assume its truth and use biblical rhetoric and images to distort its meaning.

If my body is a temple,
Is my womb an alter?
Can a man
Desecrate
Me?

“Desecrate” invokes the poem’s title, as Solomon’s Temple was destroyed in the Bible. The poem follows this question with a new metaphor, using closely related symbols: the Ivory Pomegranate and sceptre.

When the Ivory Pomegranate,
That impaled fruit
Fell and cracked,
It was not the
Sceptre
They lamented.

The Ivory Pomegranate is an artifact believed by biblical scholars to have adorned the high priest’s sceptre in Solomon’s Temple, and some consider this artifact proof of the temple’s existence (Avigad). The pomegranate is sexualized as it is “impaled” and damaged, and the sceptre acts as a phallus. The title of the poem also subtly questions the validity of purity as archeologists have found no sound proof that Solomon’s Temple ever existed.

Motherhood is a recurring subject in my work and serves as a means by which I understand womanhood. Several of my poems are about my own mother. These poems aim to examine my mother and our relationship without overt sentimentality or assumed reverence. My poem “My Mother,” details the harassment my mother experienced as a nurse from surgeons— their attempts to sway her with material luxuries and their desire to make her a housewife. In the last stanza, this poem uses medical rhetoric to expose the surgeons’ oversimplification of my mother’s desires.

They want to pry open

her sternum and push

their hands

inside her chest ...

I say go ahead,

cleave, cut, and scrape.

You will never get at

her disease.

The image of the hands and chest is both surgical and sexual, combining skill and desire but rendering both defective. The verb phrase “get at” is abstract and hard to imagine, paralleling this inability, and the disease is, in fact, not a disease at all but a woman’s ability to transcend materialism and expectation.

Influences

My poetry is influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by every poet I have read. My affinity for concision was spurred by my early exposure to the work of William Carlos Williams. His use of simple language and stylized images changed my

understanding of poetry, pulling me away from the long-winded, whimsical language I thought characterized poetry. I have reverence for and derive inspiration from several women poets, including Marie Howe and Kim Addonizio. Marie Howe's poem "The Girl" has stayed with me since I first read it in her collection *What the Living Do*. Her reflection on girlhood has set the tone for many of my poems about gender and childhood:

-if I could remember a day when I was utterly a girl
and not yet a woman-
but I don't think there was a day like that for me ...
and even if I could go back in time to her as me, the age I am now

she would never come into my arms
without believing that I wanted something.

Howe's poem resonates with me and describes the blurred distinction between girlhood and womanhood in a world that begs girls to grow up and punishes women for aging. The suspicion possessed by her child self reminds me of my own confusion as I have grown up and experienced the push and pull of society's expectations for my gender. I also appreciate Kim Addonizio's work. Her fearlessness when discussing sex, alcoholism, and motherhood has pushed me to write about issues that make me uncomfortable and not trade effective imagery or diction for politeness or restraint. Her poem "My Heart," from her collection *Lucifer at the Starlight* influenced my poem "Bildungsroman." "My Heart," like "Bildungsroman," is a list poem firing images with a repeating "that." The images push the poem toward the final image of the fictitious tower, the speaker's inability to connect or make herself vulnerable.

That haven for truckers, that bottomless cup.

That biome. That wilderness preserve.

That landing strip with no runway lights

where you are aiming your plane,

imagining a voice in the tower,

imagining a tower.

Conclusion

As my first collection, *Bildungsroman* is an exploration of self. My growth as an artist and as a woman are dependent on one another. So much of style and craft is deciding what is important to you; in turn, my collection is a reflection of my life, perspective, and values. Coming into my own as a poet and as a woman does not end here: it is an ongoing process, to be guided by those who have gone before.

Bildungsroman

That empty goldfish bowl.
That abandoned microcosm.
Those tiny smudges where I once pressed my nose.
That clinking of coins. That magic claw and purple bear.
Those chubby hands clenched, driving,
crashing every time.
That holiday. Those jarring shouts.
Those fragments of glass in a fortress of untouched green beans.
That cellophane prize. Those “cancer sticks.”
That long way home. That breathy exchange.
Those freshly flowered panties that littered the floor.
That honest mirror and that lying smile.
That sallow surface of skin.
Those colorful candies, bitter and smooth.
That just one,
Then that one more.
That ecstasy of stupor.
That porcelain crown.
That hole in a bucket that never fills.
That hollow place,
Dark and damp,
Where innocence once slept.
That shallow goldfish grave
I swore, if I tried,
I could fit into.
In that moment I was small enough.

Peeling Cane

He pulls the bone knife
against the green cane,
wiggles the blade
with stiff hands
slow, each time
slower
around knobs. His white hair
yellows
from hair tonic.

She swings legs
long, each time
longer
from wooden stool,
eyes the tin bowl,
its cadence of
thumps as cuts of sugary pulp
tumble.
She teeters.

They chew. She,
piece after piece.
Has not yet learned
to chew slowly.
He smiles,
watches her shadow
swing
as the taste fades.

Pigeon

The pigeon clucks and hops across the porch,
pink feet like hands and bulbous, inky eyes.
It reels and wobbles like a windup toy.
One idle wing, the other mimics flight.
I crouch on runty legs and palm the ground,
reach to touch its freckled purple breast.
I hop up and down, make a cooing sound.
I hold its beating chest against my chest.
My father plucks the bird from my embrace.
Gently nods for me to stay behind.
From calloused hands the pigeon flies away
Above the pines beyond the wood line.

An older me still listens for the bird,
Its purple wing, the *snap* I never heard.

Twenty

I am a girl, and
I am twenty, opening
my car door
because I cannot
reach
to fumble
with the buttons
on the ATM.
I am crumpling
the receipt and
throwing it into
the pile
on the floorboard
beneath my
empty
passenger
seat.

At Night

At night,
I am a fish.
Gutted, eyes wide open,
I ponder the popcorn ceiling
searching for shapes and faces of presidents.
I lie naked,
nipples perked by biting, acrid air.
Gas mask breathing.
Chicken skin.
Eyeballs swollen and overexposed,
I wait for the cousin of death,
probing silently my scabby hook
and my clammy existence.

Child at Work

The sand is his construction site.
With his right hand he smears,
cold grit
across his brow. Beneath
his yellow hard hat he directs,

the job, shovels stubborn loads
with his plastic
spade, sends
his dump truck off
to the quarry of marbles
and driveway pebbles.

From my blue lawn
chair I watch, want to ask
why so practical?
Where is your castle?
Maybe out with tides
Like mine are.

Solomon's Temple

They told us: your body is
A temple,
So be
Chaste.
Though they spoke to every-
Body,
I couldn't help but feel
They spoke to
Mine.
If my body is a temple,
Is my womb an altar?
Can a man
Desecrate
Me?
When the Ivory Pomegranate,
That impaled fruit
Fell and cracked,
It was not the
Sceptre
They lamented.

Winter Ghazal

I strip to nothing in the long mirror, disembody
a shell that is not my own. This pallid foreign body.

The bed rejects your vacancy. The mattress still dips on the left.
A pale indentation where once a body.

In Winter the kitchen window and I keep watch
for red caps or green bicycles. A sudden hue of somebody.

It's always cold in morning. The floor creaks under bare feet.
Sunlight swims in icy panes, heating an empty body

and its familiar pallor. The tinge of blue, hardwood spine
belonging to nobody.

Things My Mother Tells Me
About The Parking Lot

Walk
with persistence
but not far. you should
park close.
Scan
under your vehicle,
do not linger.
Grasp
your key
like a blade
tightly between
middle and ring fingers
so
tightly
that your knuckles
are as white
as your face and
Survey
the parking lot every
few seconds to ensure
you are alone.
if he is there
if he calls you
baby
or lady or even
your own name

Ignore
him
if he tries
to cop a feel do not tell
him how you feel.
you should not engage.
Run to your car.
close and lock the door
as soon as you climb in
and then drive.
Drive away.
if you think he
is following
take three lefts
or three rights.
Drive in a circle
so you
Know.

My Mother

smells
like latex,
a sterile perfume
of hospital.
Surgeons
with their stiff hair and bright
shoes watch her
soothe and dress
in her blue scrubs.

They imagine
themselves,
not atrophied,
but wounded by some
ambiguous, brave incident
so she can sponge clean
with her slender fingers
their bulging egos.

They want to take her out
in their silver bullet cars
and buy her wedged
sandals made of cork
she can dress up
or down and watch her pop
her red lips in their
passenger seat mirrors.

They want to cast her
among casseroles and feel her,
strong and unfailing,
beside them at galas.
They want to watch her
bathing their soft babies,
a carrot stain, faint
on her cotton blouse.
They want her after
the children are asleep.
Want her atop their feathered beds
with open arms
and legs.

They want to pry open
her sternum and push
their hands
inside her chest,
and when they ask me,
the daughter,
Scalpel?
I say go ahead,
cleave, cut, and scrape.
You will never get at
her disease.

Wake

In my grandmother's kitchen
Caladiums brush
the stained glass
window above the sink.
To the left a pale wall unit
circulates an off-smell
of mothballs.

Her light green oven
stands stoic, ticking softly
under its burners,
while a fruit fly gently
lands on a fuzzy,
mottled peach.

Aunt Martha,
leaving the parlor's
somber congregation
of flowers and casseroles,
breaks
the morning stillness.

She kneels
in silence before
the wooden cabinets
and carefully nestles
the corningware
into cardboard egg boxes.

Sunbeams slice dust
illuminating dim air.

My Mother Never Wears Shorts

Says skin above her knees
sags. Unsuitable
for display.

Does it matter that one July those same
legs ran hard
as her naked, able
arms reached
for the pink bicycle seat,
me squinting over shoulder to smile
as I teetered,
unaware?

Is it not enough that
she balanced,
kept me atop
the orange, turning world?

On Toni Morrison's Beloved

Was spiteful,
Full
Of a baby's
Venom.
Its iron hearth,
Hot
As Media's bosom.
Its frame
Shook,
An infant fist.
Its floors
Sweated,
Sodden with
Mother's milk.
Sweet Home
at 124.
Four walls
Of paneled
Kindling.

A Quatrain for Medea

The sky is scorched, a mother's spite,
And Corinth she commands
From chariot with dragon's breath,
A glimpse of infant hand.

When You Left

When you left,
I lost weight
Only from my shoulders.
I ate tandoori chicken out of a Pyrex bowl
Until my skin turned golden brown,
And no one asked,
“like Casinos or 7-11’s?”

Your mom called, and I told her,
“Trudy,
Irregardless is to a word
as your son is to my boyfriend.”

I held a baby
And a conversation today
And didn’t feel guilty about either.
I watched that Sarah McLachlan commercial,
And had the CIA wire her money from your trust fund,
for dog food
and better background music.

When you left,
Loneliness buzzed dully in my ear,
Like a sick mosquito.
I sat,
An island,
In a vast, black futon,
But I asked a beetle on my carpet
How he felt about Israel.
He said, “huh?”
And I felt like you were there again.

Watermelon Poem

When I was fifteen you split
me open.
you sucked pulp,
your chin dribbling
pink.
You put your
hands inside of me.

Charles Simic says
we eat the smile and spit out
the teeth. You ate
my smile; I spit
you out,
seed by seed
in summer.

Spotless

On the film Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

He lies,
his head
under the silver dome
he employed,
with its tangled
wires and incessant
beeping,
to erase
his memories. But,
he loses
resolve.
He scrambles,
listens for the hidden
snort in her laughter,
tugs at the ends of
her wild, green hair,
chases her face
through the blue haze
of the shadowed beach,
around the apartment,
over the strewn shoes,
Polaroids, and piles
of laundry,
through the Vietnamese restaurant,
where they ate,
sending seismic vibrations
through bowls of hot Pho,
grasps her
mittened hand
on the sheet of crystal ice,
skates faster
and faster
As she pulls him
Into the chill air.

To Whom It May Concern
in My British Literature Class

Young man in navy pleated pants,
Say more about that heart transplant

You saw in Papua New Guinea.
And U.S. senators, you've met how many?

You shook their hands, how firm your grip
on politics and my right hip

as you squeeze past to your desk,
all your catholic guilt repressed.

Your teeth are Chiclets in your mouth.
You smile so hard they all fall out.

Go sweep them up. You're not at home.
I'll lend you my X chromosome.

Tell me about your law school plans,
your favorite volume by Ayn Rand,

and all the ways you hope to make
America a stellar place.

Peter,

When you compared
relationships
to oceanography
I knew I was
fucked.
You were placid,
stern and
lukewarm,
and I saw your dad/
senator's
fish tank,
a tinge of
cloudy green
in his marble office.
You called them
"glow fish."
I looked them up,
these iridescent
little fish.
They are GloFish®
Galactic Purple®
Starfire Red®
Moonrise Pink®

namesake

I spent time reading the paper I learned
useful words *annulate* *nephridial* |
already knew the words “seminal” “receptacle” but had not had
the occasion to use them during dinner conversations I have since
then

The first clue to its uniqueness four rings on each body
segment instead of the five normal
jaw positioned differently five pairs of eyes
digestive tract has some neat features as well
back on itself unsurprising for humans startling in a leech
it is not simply the leech that is special in its own right
only a few
squishy millimeters wide a challenge to dissect without
distorting the scientists developed ways to prepare a
specimen CT scans highlight subtleties of innards
doubles

Source text: “Is Amy Tan Actually ‘Thrilled’ a Leech is Named After Her?” By Susan Milius, *Science News* 3/4/2016

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