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## **Bildungsroman**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Bildungsroman

by

Mary Spooner

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of The University of  
Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of English

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## 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

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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 altar?  
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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