

Ploughshares

WINTER 1999-00

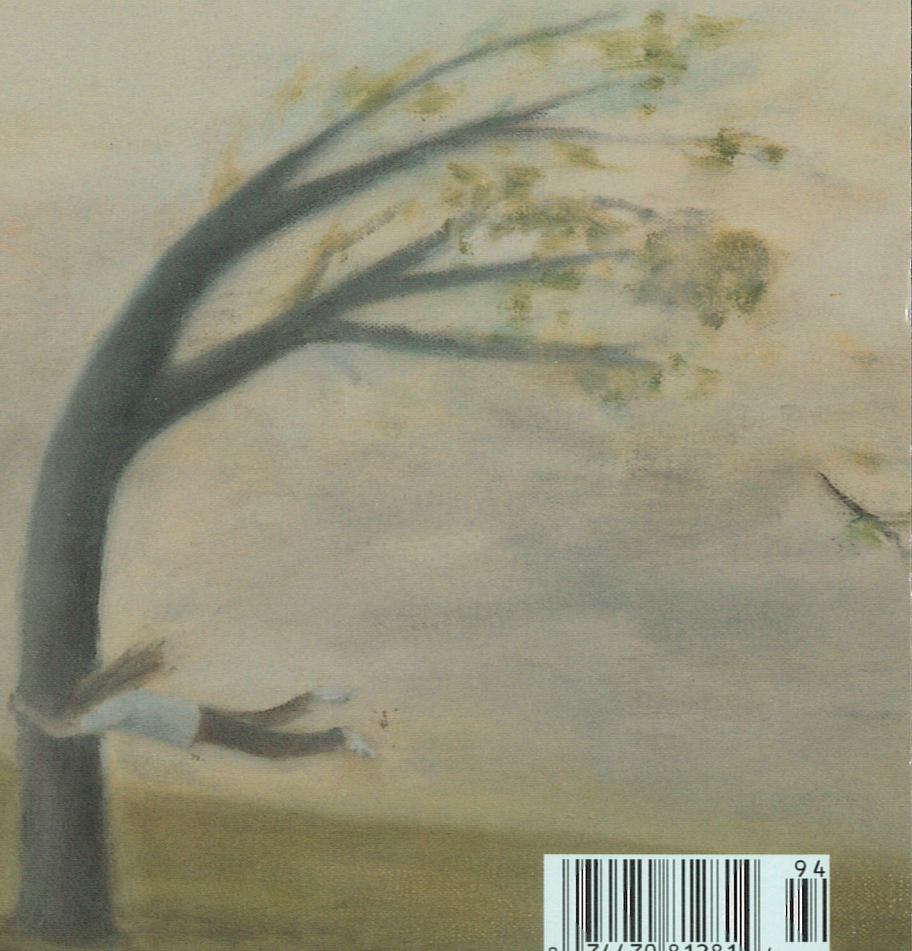
AT EMERSON COLLEGE

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Stories and poems edited by

Madison Smartt Bell

& Elizabeth Spires



*Lamb of God, you take away our imperfections,
through manipulation of the flawed genes.
Because God wants us to be like Him, indefinite
(because God wants us,
wants us clones of Him)*

how soon will the womb of Gloria be implanted with the
image and likeness of seed . . .

(Enucleated
iambs, perfectible
refrains [to hold oneself
back, forbear],
imperfectible rhymes
[glory/story, likeness/
Loch Ness]:
grotesque
miscarriage

 indefinite
 likeness,
glory, electroshock, tadpole, rough beast, seed)

how soon will the womb of Gloria be implanted (*Hail, O favored
one, the Lord is with thee*) with the image and likeness
(fore-born) of Seed . . .

Other People's Mothers

While Wanda had an abortion, I had lunch with her mother. "Please," Wanda had said, swathed in large paper napkins, "just get her away from here." Then she closed her eyes, and her boyfriend, Ramon, nodded, so I took Wanda's mother to a Chinese dumpling shop.

Once there, she told me the old story about how Wanda's father wanted to name her Espinaca. Spinach, in Spanish. How Wanda was a whiny child who never could decide on what flavor of ice cream to order. Once they had to leave the store without any ice cream at all.

She kept mispronouncing Wanda's boyfriend's name and dropping dumplings. Finally she stabbed a dumpling through the middle with one chopstick and used the other chopstick to saw it in half. "I just love other cultures," she said, "but this is ridiculous."

Wanda's mother: long, gray hair in a single braid, with cheekbones that shot her face forward into your business. Wearing a purple smock with orange trim and tapping her bitten fingernails on the table—"Do you think they're done? Oh my. Oh my shit."

I said, "It's going to be okay, Nancy," or some stupid thing. She stared at me.

"This is my granddaughter or grandson, theoretically. Although a fetus isn't yet a human being. And a woman has a right to choose. But someone's vacuuming out my daughter's insides. Since she came from my insides, et cetera, things aren't as separate as you think, missy. And let me tell you, if it had been legal in my time, I would have done the exact same thing with Wanda." Wanda's mother straightened her smock.

"So do you have regrets now? With Wanda?"

"There's always regret after you act, or don't act. That's true of any big decision."

She was so imperious with her garish clothes and outdated perfume, I said, "Will you be *my* mommy?" She laughed. Then she stopped laughing with a frown and put her hand on her stomach.

When I came back to the clinic, Wanda asked, "How is she?" She was hooking her bra and pulling her sweatshirt over her head.

"Fine," I said. "Stoically liberal."

"Where is she?"

"Getting sick in the bathroom."

We waited at the ladies' room door for Wanda's mother until she reemerged, smiling at Wanda with watery eyes and arms stretched out. "My baby," Wanda's mother said, then halted, knowing she had said the wrong thing.

Me, I lost my own mother, although she's still alive. Some nights in my apartment I light a fifty-cent glass candle with a picture of St. Jude painted on one side. I recite the prayer pasted on the back—*Oración a San Judas Tadeo*—knowing little Spanish, besides *espinaca* and some swear words. "*Glorioso apóstol, San Judas siervo fiel,*" I say, "bring my mother back to me," but the painted face says, There are other mothers.

I dated Macon for two years because his mother took my arm when I met her and said, "Make sure he eats broccoli, okay?"

For me, more than a mother. She was my second-chance mama. I loved her, hemmed my pants for her. I followed her around her apartment, asking questions: How do you knit? What are basted eggs?

Macon's mother prefaced her sentences with "Guess what?" She told guests that I was her third daughter, which caused confusion when Macon and I held hands and kissed.

I learned the rules—what to cook for holidays, what to say about the movies we saw together. If there was a dog in the movie, it was a good movie. If there were guns in the movie, it was a good movie.

Macon's mother thought I needed "toning down," so she gave me a book entitled *Wherever You Go, There You Are*.

"Buckaroo Banzai," I said.

"And likewise to you," she said. She spelled Chanukah wrong on the card, but I'd imagine that most Southern Baptists would.

"You run around too much. You need to *smell those roses.*" With each word, she pounded the cutting board with her sharp fist.

"It's hard to manage my time. A girl's got to make a living," I told her, dicing garlic.

"It's just as easy to fall in love with a rich man as it is to fall in love with a poor one. Marilyn Monroe said so, and look how well she turned out."

I stared.

She amended, "Well, before that overdose business. Anyway," pointing the turkey baster at me, "*you* need a rich one."

"But what about Macon?" I asked her. Her son. In the next room, his balding head shone in the lamplight. He pulled a hair out of his mouth, then looked at it.

"Oh," she said. "Well, there is that."

She called the day I broke up with Macon. I cried so hard, the phone kept slipping from my hand.

"I'm just so shocked," she said.

I mumbled something that had no words.

"Lunch," she promised. At her house. I'm still waiting to be fed.

When I was small, my mother told me the things that a mother tells little girls in order to get along. She told me that when you drink something hot, never sip it the first time. Instead, dip your top lip into the cup. That way it looks like you're drinking, but instead you're testing.

"What if you burn your lip?" I asked.

"It's not as bad as a tongue."

So I did, burned my lip with the milk-laced tea, it was too hot. I thought of what would hurt least—an elbow, an earlobe. Nowadays I poke my finger in the cup, even in restaurants, on dates.

My mother told me, "No, serial killers are not people who kill cereal. No, numbers have no smell. No, dead bugs don't dream."

She arranged concentric circles of bite-sized dabs of cream cheese in a pastel plastic bowl. I scooped them up with my fingers and poked them into my mouth. She picked my grapes off their spines. She pretended that my sandwich could talk, flapping its breadly lips. "Eat me," it growled in her hands.

My mother sang "You Are My Sunshine," skipping over the part about waking up and finding your sunshine gone. She pulled warm clothes out of the dryer and dropped them on top of me at naptime.

She said, "There are 2.8 calories in each and every stamp."

She did mother things.
She told me that rivers come from rain.

Next was Frederick. His mother had grown up poor in the Depression. She often quizzed me:

"Do you ever leave the knife in the peanut butter jar and just close it up tight like this?" She screwed the top on. The knife clunked thickly inside. When I said, "No, never," she put the jar back on the shelf. "Saves," she said, nodding her head.

"Do you ever leave the cheese cutter in the bag with the cheese? Saves."

"Do you ever put the cooking pot in the refrigerator with the food still in it? Saves."

She told me about sewing across the toes of her old torn socks and putting them on her kids' feet so they'd be warm walking to school, with socks that ran all the way up their legs.

During her entire weeklong visit, she insisted on staying in our one-bedroom apartment. She said, "Oh, just throw me in the corner with a chocolate bar, and I'm happy as two clams." We gave her our bed and slept on the floor ourselves. In the morning she said that the mattress was a bit hard, which it was.

She said, "There are three ways of telling time: where you lived, where you worked, and whom you went out with. It's a good idea to keep these things written down on a piece of paper."

When I lived with Frederick, I loved him with a subtle desperation that was tied to anticipated loss. I watched my diet, eating whole grains. I washed everything twice. I put pennies in a jar, skimmed on tips. When he finally did leave me, I felt dazed and relieved. As if my grip had grown so tight, only after it was broken could I again move my hands.

Frederick's mother didn't call me. She was on a singles' cruise at the time of the breakup, and she probably forgot after that point.

Frederick wrote his goodbye note on the back of our electric bill, which was in his name. I tore it up with the tips of my fingers and flushed it down the toilet, a silly smile on my face. "Saves," I said.

When I was about six, my mother had begun sleeping all the time.

She took a nap right after making my stepfather's tepid breakfast and sacking any lunches for the day. The kiss at the door, then she moved toward the couch as if she were walking down the middle of a canoe. Once outside, I watched her through the tinted front windows of the house. Every morning she fell backward onto the couch, picked up her book, laid it like a tent on her pink terrycloth chest, and closed her eyes. Then I ran off to the waiting bus at the bus stop.

My teacher showed us the parts of a peanut. She told the girls, You can be firemen, or mailmen. Or policemen. I thought about my stepfather's fists when my mother typed up her résumé, and my mother's bruised face the next morning.

After school I always rushed home to tell my mother all the new ways I had learned that she was wrong. She was usually awake when I came home, with her cheek creased from the seams of the upholstered couch pillow. She poured orange juice and pulled out the peanut butter jar. Then she left me an open-faced sandwich with the spoon still stuck in the middle as she went to lie down.

At night, after my stepfather hung up his pants and my mother toppled back to the sofa, I went upstairs to my room, there being no other place. Hoping my mother wouldn't wake up as my stepfather locked my bedroom door behind him, saying, "You like this"; as I said, "Okay."

When I finally told her, she kicked him out. After a couple of years.

"You ruined my marriage," she told me.

When my friend Wanda was eleven, she was walking down the street with her mother. Six or seven teenage boys started hooting from a fire escape railing. "Hey, baby, hey, mama," things like that. Wanda's mother stopped in the street, confused. Encouraged, the boys yelled more loudly and lewdly, and Wanda started tugging at her arm. "Come on, Mom!" She knew the boys from school. Finally, Wanda's mother put her hands on her hips, looked up, and shouted, "If you boys don't cut that out, I'm going to come up there and *rape* you." They shut up, abruptly. Wanda cried from embarrassment then, but when she tells the story now, she laughs so hard that she has to go to the bathroom.

I had been seeing Jake for a year when his mother announced her second visit. It was close to Mother's Day. After we hung up the phone with her, my left eyelid swelled up immediately. The first time I met her, I had gotten a rash all over my upper arms and inner thighs.

She pinched my shoulder when she saw me. "The weight looks good on you," she said. I wasn't aware that I had accumulated weight, and when we ate lunch together, I ordered a cheeseburger and thought, Fuck it.

That night Jake wanted to have sex, but I wondered if he was thinking about his mother, too. So we held hands as he slept and I didn't. With my other hand, I pinched the skin over my stomach and thought of that old commercial, "Can You Pinch an Inch?" I pinched many inches, then lay in bed with pinch-bruises tingling on my skin.

The next day, we picked up Jake's mother at her hotel. In the lobby she suggested that I take Jake's last name, "just in case." His last name is Holtzenweiser. Jake asked her, "Are you serious?" She tilted her head on her neck like an injured bird. "It was good enough for me," she said.

I had plucked some eyelashes out of my left eye in the attempt to reduce the swelling. I plucked a few too many. Jake's mother asked, "What happened, a kitchen fire?" She was sympathetic, so I said yes. Jake wrapped a strong arm around me and announced that he had bought twenty lottery tickets. "We've all got it made," he said.

Jake's mother checked out of her hotel the last night of her visit and stayed at our place. Making dinner, I pulled baked olives out of the hot oven. I forgot to put the mitts on first. I managed to deposit the sizzling glass pot safely on the stovetop before running to the freezer and grabbing the ice cube trays. Jake pulled at my hands and told me to let him see. They were white and already blistered.

Jake's mother wrapped them in clean dishrags and taped them shut with duct tape. This felt worse, then better. Jake fed me dinner with a fork. His mother pretended that this was ordinary.

Later, I heard them talking in the next room while I lay in bed. I couldn't hear their words, but I knew that they were talking about me from their voices. I did hear "poor thing," the one thing I was

supposed to hear. I translated it into Spanish, then Japanese. *Pobrecita. Kawaiso.*

The day Jake's mother left, I watched him make sandwiches for her plane ride. He sliced havarti cheese, tomatoes, avocados, and then stuffed sprouts in the cracks. She packed her dirty socks into neat rolls.

She started to kiss me goodbye at the door, but I was beginning a bad cold and didn't want to infect her. My nose itched, and my eyes were watering. How much more of this can I take? I thought. We walked her outside.

"Bye, Mary Margaret," I said as she walked down the sidewalk to her rental car.

"Call me Mom," she said, and I waved. She wasn't my mother. My mother sent me Water Pik attachments for my birthday if she remembered, which she didn't that year. My mother said that I was her least favorite child, although I was her only child. My mother said, "Don't call me, I'll call you," and didn't.

When Jake's mother called, safely home, we said that I was fine now. We pretended that this was true.

However, eyelid swollen, hands wrapped in gauze, sneezing on the couch, I thought about how my body comes from somebody's body. This is what's true. Yet impossible.

A few months after he left, my stepfather came back for a few weeks. My mother stopped sleeping and spent a lot of time doing laundry. My stepfather called me Liar. "Hi, Liar. How was school today?" When I told him, "Fine," he said, "Sure it was."

One evening he made a lot of noise reading the newspaper. He kept hitting it in the middle to make it stand straight up in the air, and when it buckled over, he swore and slapped it against the arm of the sofa. I tried to concentrate on my homework at the kitchen table, but made the mistake of saying a vocabulary word aloud, trying to memorize it. I think the word was "infantile." My stepfather sprang out of sofa and charged toward me. He grabbed my arm, pushed me through the kitchen past my mother and through the back door.

About six inches of snow lay on the ground, and I had no shoes or socks on my feet. They were already hurting, beginning to numb in the snow. I looked through the kitchen window at my

mother standing inside. She looked back at me through the glass. My stepfather stood next to her and said something in her ear. She put her fists on her hips. He left the room. At first, I was worried that she'd accidentally cut herself with the knife still gripped in one fist. Without realizing it, my own fists rose to my own hips, and we watched each other, mirror images. She laughed then, slowly, as I shivered in the snow. I could no longer feel my feet, what I was standing on. We stood there and stared at each other until I realized that I wasn't standing on anything at all.

Wanda's mother called me at work two months ago. Her voice was loud. I heard the same siren in both of my ears, the one attached to the receiver and the one hanging in the air. "Where are you?" I asked her.

"I'm in the lobby of your office building," she said. "How about lunch?"

"Nancy, its nine-thirty in the morning."

"I'll wait here. They have nice chairs," she said. "When's your lunch hour? I don't want to set you off schedule."

I hurried downstairs to see her. She wore a pink kimono-dress and balanced a wrapped present on her barely exposed knees.

"Happy happy day," she said.

I opened it right there in the lobby, striped paper drifting to the floor. It was a straw hat with purple plastic grapes dangling from one side.

"It's for your head," she said and fell off her heel suddenly. She smiled, drunk.

Down the street, over coffee served in a bowl and beignets, she began to sniffle.

"She won't talk to me, Wanda won't," she said. She pushed at her long hair, distracted. It stayed where she pushed it, as if underlaid with wires.

"What's the matter?" I asked again.

"She doesn't like my house," she muttered. "She doesn't like my boyfriend. She doesn't call him by name; she calls him by number. I think he's Number 35. What could that mean? Oh, I know. She's cruel, she's a Nazi, I brought a cruel Nazi into this world."

"She's not a Nazi, Nancy," I said, nearly mixing the two words up.

"Of course not," she snapped. "She's Jewish."

She was sobering up a bit and settling into her hangover. She wore a real cameo on a chain around her neck.

"These are good," she said, picking up a beignet dusted with powdered sugar.

I bit into one and inhaled sugar, instantly sputtering and coughing. I tried to hold the coughs while I drank coffee, but my diaphragm shuddered against itself, and I blew bubbles into the cup. Wanda's mother walloped me on the back with a well-conditioned palm.

"Snap out of it," she said, and I did, suddenly.

"Sorry," I said.

"Breathe out when you eat," she told me.

"The whole time?"

"Yes."

"But when do you breathe in?"

"When you're not eating," she said.

"Uh-huh."

Suddenly, I looked at her worn face. It was too late for me. And for her.

"You snap out of it, too," I told her, a little too late for context.

She left, as she had the right to do. As soon as she left, there was loss, and there was hunger. I am thirty already, I thought. Thirty. I sat alone at the table for a long time before I finally ate both of our breakfasts, eggs Benedict and trout fried in caper sauce, breathing out the whole time.

But sometimes I think of that last time I saw her, my own mother. Together we visited her mother, Grandma Eloise. My grandmother had experienced a succession of bad men, from her husband who called her "slut" and carried a knife to bed to keep her in line, to her son-in-law who flipped a gun in her face and told her to get out of her own house. Now my grandmother had cataracts and glaucoma. She usually just sat all day in a chair faced away from both the window and the television set. She also had Alzheimer's but recognized some voices, not mine. My mother's voice sliced through the stale afternoon. It glanced off the rusted legs of furniture and the ceramic angels rimmed with dust.

"Guess who can't even wash her own dishes?" my mother said. "Guess who can't manage to keep her drawers clean?"

"Me, me," said my grandmother.

My mother's mouth formed a tightly pressed smile as she slapped the frozen lasagna onto a cutting board. My grandmother flinched at the noise.

I put my hand on my grandmother's shoulder, but it gave at the pressure like bread dough.

On the way home, my mother clasped her gloved hands above the steering wheel.

"I can't believe you did all that," I said.

"All what?"

"What if I do that to you when you're old?" I asked her. "How would you feel?"

She shrugged.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" She looked down at her thin coat, her lap.

"How did you get so bitter?"

Her face pursed up. "Listen to you, the big pop psychologist." Her voice caught a little.

Thinking she was hurt, I lowered my voice. "Is it because of your marriage?"

"You're unfit to talk about my marriage. You're the reason I'm alone today."

Staring at the mile markers and the dead scenery, I heard myself say, "You're no kind of mother. You're not my mother."

I turned my head to look at her. Tears poked out of the corners of her eyes, catching in the wrinkles. I was so sorry. And I wasn't sorry at all. Past her head, the world shot past too quickly for me to register it. Then it stopped as she pulled over and parked on the side of the road. She left the car running as she took off her gloves.

She grabbed my left hand and aligned it with hers, palms facing us. They were perfectly identical—like twin maps. Lifeline, love line, the same creases in the thumbs. The crooked forefinger. All the same lines and cracks waiting to happen.

"Ha," she said. I shook my head and tried to pull my hand away. She just gripped it tighter and turned toward me quickly. Her warm breath pushed against my face until I thought I would faint.

"If I'm not your mother," she asked, "then who the hell are you?"

Overture

for Gabriella

There had been a cricket in the basement
when I dreamt you were an unopened envelope on my chest.
I heard on the radio how silverware suddenly tarnishes in a drawer
before disaster, tornadoes, sudden changes in weather.
The voice on the radio, on the lookout, she said, "It's beautiful . . .
it's not dark . . . it's good." Meaning the silverware.

For weeks we watched your heart
your breath, dip and peak and wander along the screen.
The week we brought you home, they found the long-gone
missing woman's body while deer hunting in one of the western
counties under the year's first snow

—every valley shall be exalted.

The television vet spoke of the jealous dog
swallowing all of its owner's jewelry whenever she left,
even the dreamed-after diamond tennis bracelet.
I saw a bee-bearded man, listened to Tchaikovsky's span of months
and to a piece of music called the "Silken Ladder Overture,"

and just as finely were we ascending to some place past
the blurred coming-home-from-the-hospital photograph, beyond
even sight of our selves. I dreamt someone asked
for a lock of *my* hair in a world of perfectly
cloned sheep, of "silver needles" tea beneath

the all-throated prize finches. A blood and primrose world—
my darling—a white-tea-of-leaf-buds world, mild as your first tears.
When you sleep beside me, my arm locks across you.
Oh, how we'll whirl and circle, be whirled and fear-throated
a breathless carnivalesque, a ride of spinning cups.