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of
WOMEN

AMY
GERSTLER



PENGUIN POETS

Ode to Birth Control

Fertility hot on my heels like a Fury,
and I at that young age in such a blind hurry
to embrace the opposite of what was chaste.
That's where you came in—You jellies,
You douches, in white pliable tubes
like the family toothpaste. And You:
cylindrical plastic applicator, squirting
a plume of contraceptive goo
on a bathroom wall
that first night I fumbled with you.

Ancient birth control methods include:
fish bladders linen sheaths
honey lint acacia leaves
and my personal favorite: *crocodile dung*
gummy substances to stop up
the mouth of the womb
silkworm guts were also thought useful

Margaret Sanger's words
clang in the head:
woman as brood animal

A friend sends a Victorian postcard
of a large stork, bundle dangling from its beak,
chasing a woman in hat and bustle
as she attempts to defend herself with her umbrella.
The caption reads: *and still the villain pursues her*

Rare, that early flash of self-knowledge
that while I might care deeply
for other people's children, I was not mother
material. Not sane enough. Ill too often.
Etc. I don't believe I have to provide an excuse.
And so, You, Madame Diaphragm,
were pressed into service: shallow rubber cup
anointed with cold-as-a-Slurpee spermicide,
then folded in half and shoved up inside.
The diaphragm slept in a pink plastic case
that clicked shut like the hatch of a
spacecraft. Diaphragm: a contraceptive
device that Margaret Sanger (I will kiss her
shoes if we meet in the afterlife) was jailed
for smuggling into the U.S., in brandy
bottles, birth control being illegal in 1918.
Pamphlets or books on the topic were
also banned, considered obscene.

During certain years I nevertheless
ached for an infant's weight to cradle, caress,
longed to clone *in utero* the men I loved best.
Nowadays, when I get my hands on
a nice, juicy baby, somebody's burping,
shitting little god, I tremble and pray.
Some babies wave arms and legs languidly
as if rehearsing water ballet.
A few are as inconsolable as adults.
Except a baby is never wrong.

To be taken over, invaded. To swell. To harbor a being in your body who won't
leave. To be a vessel, a container. To once again become secondary to a life
deemed more important than yours. To host a kind of parasite. To have your

organs squashed to make room for another human. Not to be alone in your body anymore, to become a form of packaging and/or housing. To be temporarily double-souled. To eat, sleep, and breathe for two. To be sapped, waylaid, stopped in your tracks. To be trapped, to have no means of escape, to be forced to

*(until men and women are absolved from
the fear of becoming parents,
except when they themselves desire it)*

become not a person but a place, a site, someone's ground zero, their very first hometown. They hide in the guest room of your womb and set up camp. And your body begins to shift for their benefit. Whether you're willing or not. Whether you have money or a place to live. Whether you can take of yourself, or

These "medicines," these devices,
became in my day as part of one's anatomy,
one's exertions/insertions,
the secrecy of secretions,
the panics, narrow escapes,
nightmares of being chased
by armies of greedy babies.

Let me alone! Forgive me!

We girls stared down pharmacy clerks
or squirmed in stirrups
of bow tie-wearing gynecologists,
bought or begged these items
and prayed they'd work.

or, you may eat a concoction of oil and quicksilver after the fact

And You IUDs . . . Copper-7, tiny
wire-wrapped numeral who caused
a year of hellish cramps. Dalkon
Shield shaped like a horseshoe crab.
Hormone pills in roulette wheel dispensers.

Plastic, rubber, and chemical protectresses,
all I have to offer is this awkward song.
Across the trajectory of my childless life,
I call out to you now, name you and praise you.
I owe you all I've tried to be.