

The Language of Flowers

Liz Core Shenk

Small Town Girl

Is there anything more familiar
to a young girl
in a small town
than waking up to bird song?

In the room at the top of the stairs,
which she shares with her sister,
she pushes her bed up close to the window
and no matter the season, cracks it open
to feel the breeze.

Even when her father closes it
after he kisses her goodnight,
to keep his daughters warm
while they sleep,
she waits until he leaves
and opens it again
just to hear robins
in the morning.

First Love

You were a child
and I was a child.

But to me you were a world—
so I became your moon.

The way I followed you past morning,
pulling you in with jealous tides,
turning circles around you,
gazing over my shoulder,
watching the way you moved.

This is the Woman I Aspire To Be

My grandmother told me once
that sometimes in the warm, final days of spring,
she strips off all her clothes and runs outside
to dance naked in the rain.

Her home rests on the side
of a forgotten highway
in northern Iowa,
their backyard, acres of lonely cornfields.
No would ever see her
in her bare skin glory,
wild and lawless,
not a scandal, but a harmless
(though succulent)
secret.

And yet,
even in such quiet places,
how many 80-year-olds
on a late spring day
lay the newspaper down on the kitchen table,
unbutton their shirts,
unpeel their pants,
walk into the backyard
barefoot and free?

This is the woman
I aspire to be.

Advice for Pregnancy and Childbirth

With new life
comes wildfire.
Let it come.

Let it
ruin you.

Let it
scorch
your earth

Let your self
as you were
rise like smoke
from black ash
below.

Wait for the quiet
distant promise
of greener things
in you.

I promise you,
they'll come.

Every Inch

My baby's eyes look like mine.
And somehow, after many years of thinking
I don't like myself much at all,
I look at her
and all is forgiven.

Blessed is every inch of this child.
Now in her years of innocence,
and later too,
when she discovers that both the world
and her own self
have broken parts.

I'm realizing
If I can create this being
so worthy of an impossibly big love,
then I can be deserving of it as well.
Because once my mother looked at me
resting on her chest
and thought "blessed be" too.

So if I forget or don't believe
or don't rise to meet my own inherent goodness,
how much more possible is it
that the divine little girl resting on my chest right now
might possibly forget someday, too?

And there is nothing in this world
that could break my heart more.

Bird Child

This fragile thing
pecking at my hand
mouth open in want
searching eyes as wide
and curious as the moon
will someday soar
over my head
flying fearless circles
in the sky.

Greed

It has been six months since you lived inside me.
When we were a happy isolate; one in the same.

Now I wonder if I will ever feel
we are anything but one.

I wonder how I will ever be
anything but awestruck
by you.

I wonder how I can ever be
anything but greedy
for the sound of your voice
and the weight of your head on my chest.

Lost in Translation

Children your age, I've read, understand much more than they are able to express – this, of course, can be frustrating for them.

But I think, when does this ever stop?

I have language enough, still there are moments when I feel the pull of a word I don't have, a feeling I can't quite describe. I sit down to write and a memory drops into my body and inhabits my senses, and all I can say is, "I remember."

It's enraging to me, and you, on the cusp of words but feeling so deeply, how could this do anything but make you boil? You're alive for the first time – and finally, this vast moving colorful universe is beginning to settle. You are learning that the world is made of things.

Over and over I coach you, I am your *mama* and there, that's your *dada*. And now it is *nighttime*. Do you see the *moon*? It's time to take a *bath*, do you feel the *water*?

I can see that you're piecing the world together. You point and you giggle and squeal with each new understanding. Still, I don't know that you care much for getting the words right, not like me. It's the seeing that grips you in joy – it's the being in this world.

And it's me, not seeing it, that angers you. Like when I say, It's time to get out of the tub. The water is cool, your hands are pruned. Can you say *all done*? Can you say *night night*?

Now, it is your time to rage. You speak in fists and tears. You thrash your limbs through the water. You throw your head back and wail. It's been years since I spoke this feral language, but for a moment I understand.

"We must watch the water drip down the tile! We must feel how the porcelain cools our tongues! We must caress our own wonderfully rounded bellies! We must marvel at our own ten toes!

How dare you not see this world, *mama*!

How dare you not feel it all!"

The Coast

I sit by the water
watching my baby's fingers
paint brush strokes in the sand,
fully absorbed in her task
though occasionally she fights back when
her strawberry ringlets
are tousled by the breeze.
I know that she's a child playing on a beach
but what does she know of how play differs
from work or fear or grief?
And how does she know the ocean
from the warm bath I draw for her each night?
For now, she lives on the plain of mystery,
in that brief, nameless place,
where she is fearless and feral,
angry at the wind,
but trusting the earth
will hold her hands.

October Sunday

Everything is quiet
in this empty house
on this October Sunday.
The ripest afternoon sun
glowing through the kitchen curtains
and I am warmed
all the way through.
I make myself a cup of tea
just to marvel at the steam.
A crow's call
cuts through the air
and the sky feels
somehow closer.
It would be so easy to miss
on another day,
house echoing in toddler songs,
head clanging with shoulds.
But right now, I hear it,
the world whispering,
offering itself
as simple and kind
and good.

Kid Smile

I love the way joy looks
when it hides behind the corners
of your mouth.

The way you're cupping your smile
like a lightning bug trapped under your hands.

I can still see your happiness flicker,
you know,

I can still see it dance.

Letter to My Daughter

On the hopeless days
(and there will be many)
here's what I want you to do
go outside alone
somewhere you can feel the tall grass
brushing on your legs
and run
leaping over rocks and sticks
downhill through the woods
and breathe
deeply into your lungs
as many times as it takes to feel alive again
earthly and humbled and rooted again
a creature of mirth
and laughter
of endless potential
of great goodness
and darkness too
and greed and anger
and love –
sometimes all at once –
and feel yourself become closer to the earth
like your ancestors were
and know that none of the illusions that we see
the politics at play
the reverence for more than we need
the foul oasis of a screen
was ever anything more than
an invention of man –
it was never
an invention of earth
like you.

Thank You

How can I help you
today, self?
Standing with my back against the glass door,
watching the rain hit the grass and the deck boards,
too bored with myself to go back inside and
too afraid of getting wet or being seen by the neighbor to
walk forward, look up
close my eyes, and dance.
which is what I really want to do
with my day
and really, with my life.
But instead I take a few deep breaths, and I ask myself,
what is it you need, what can I do to help you today,
is there anything that we can help ourselves to
that will fill you up,
turn you on,
make you smile,
light a spark behind your eyes?
I didn't get an answer
but later, sitting at my desk,
I heard her say
thank you
for asking.

What to Leave in Year 30

Leave the miniskirts and the constant need to be “growing out your hair.”

Leave the too-tight underwear and the suck-it-in dresses.

Leave saying the words “old” or “fat” or any other word that does not connote *divine* to describe the body that your soul inhabits.

Leave the measuring of your life by the compliments you’re given or the years you’ve spent in service to money.

Leave the hopeless, mindless scrolling and the apathy and the greed for what you’re not.

Leave the party a little early.

Leave a love note for a friend.

Leave that slice of perfect peach to savor in your mouth a moment longer.

Leave yourself a little breathless from time to time
with full-hearted awe
with late-night laughter
with being brave.

Leave 30 in 30,
29 in 29,
28 in 28,
and all the other years you’ve lived
however good, however messy.

Leave yourself plenty of room to make mistakes.

Leave flowers on the table.

Leave. Go.
Just walk out the door.
And be.
And be.
And be.

Bloom

As I grow older,
I grow outward,
broader and stronger and wider.
new curves and folds emerging
like fresh petals
opening boldly on a stem.

Liturgy For Good Girls

If you want to herd the devil,
let the flowers in the gravel grow.
If you want him wearing wool,
running scared over cliffs,
hang something scandalous
on the clothing line.
Be less goodly and fearsome,
and fear a little less —
Live like a living human,
dance and swear
eat butter, have sex,
say what you really think.
The trick is
to eat when you're hungry
and scratch when you itch
and sing when you're happy
and scream and flail and roar
when you're sad or angry.
(See, darkness has you where he wants you
when you live your human life
like you're nothing but a dirty god.)
And then,
after all of this living,
keep loving
the wild oddness —
the impossibility —
of you being here
for just the briefest moment
in this holy, holy world.

Have You Ever Thought

About how
without women,
men and their war games
wouldn't exist?
And long after
we're dust because of them,
earth will remain?

So, tell me,
what is weak?

And tell me,
why do we still listen
while small men speak?

The Language of Flowers

The poets and romantics,
the men with their muses,
paint women on beds of roses,
write she was beautiful –
but didn't know it.

And we all know how easily
flowers can be trampled,
how crumpled and delicate
the damsel is when she faints.

How these stories might change
if we could speak
the language of flowers.

If we could hear what the rose
really says with her thorns.

Elizabeth Shenk is a writer, yoga instructor, and mother based in northern Indiana. Her debut chapbook *Language of Flowers* explores the often complicated relationship between mothers and daughters, and the freedom that comes with releasing societal expectations of motherhood. In her spare time, you can find Elizabeth experimenting in the kitchen, reading historical fiction, or tromping through the woods near her home. Elizabeth has upcoming published works in Swim Press's Issue 3: Sleep and Querencia Press's Winter 2023 Quarterly Anthology. To read more of her writing, you can find her on Instagram at @openwindowpoems