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Mother Amuck

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A Mother Amuck

*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child
she has borne? Isaiah 49:15a*

*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but
. . . against spiritual forces of evil in the
heavenly realms. Ephesians 6:12*

When I was twelve my father
taught me to read sow signs:
“See her snoot straw into a nest?
She’ll have pigs by dawn,” my father said.
“So we wall her off from the hooves of the herd.”
My father was nothing if not saving.

My mother warmed to hear him teach me
of signs that seeded hope:
her boy, in reading mother signs, became a man.

Next day the sow, having read her clock like a seer,
dropped ten piglets, helpless new-born babies—
slimy, eyes closed, ears pasted flat—
slippery globs of tissue.

But minds moved these globs on
jointed pencil legs through straw.
Pink noses pointed round the mother’s rump
over bristly log-legs
to find mother’s milky teats.

Father trusted me to tend the herd:
pink piglets wanting milk and warmth;
their mothers—possessive, grunting contentedly—
warming and nursing squirming litters.
I blessed them daily with clean straw—
at twelve I thought I was king.

But one night shadows of lunacy mocked the dawn.
I opened the hoghouse door to Medea
roaring in her sty.

Could the moon ice a mother's instinct?

Yesterday she ate corn,
 nested for new piglets,
 her teats dripping life.
Now her great jaws chomped on her own flesh,
 her lips smacking with its blood,
 death staining the pure pink.

Would Hecate mind a sow to spite a boy?

Grabbing a three-pronged pitchfork
 to stab a witch, I stalked the sty,
 but mangled piglets cried from the blood-red straw.

A demon's glare stared from this sow face,
 guarding her private storm.
No mother eyes wept;
no spot of blood would haunt this queen.

*Did some demon, prayed out of human house,
 own this hog heart?*

My boy's world breached, I put my pitchfork down,
 retching at this blood,
 retreating from death's shadows
 to seek a mother's sun to light me.

“Why, Mom, why would she kill her own pigs?”

“It's eerie as Cain's killing,” she said.
“She may see her own images as rats or mere meat
 or hate them like a devil sick of self.”
I wanted lunacy unraveled; she said merely,
 “Thank God such sows still strike us odd.”

That night when I trembled to the scene,
 I nearly sang to see my father
 had removed the murderous sow,
 restored the blood-red sty
 to a paradise of golden straw.

It crossed my mind that I had dreamt it all—
 until Medea's deafening roar
 re-echoed in my skull.

Mike Vanden Bosch