

# effigy of the women (who raised me)

By Ella Sage

**a collection:** *on the warmth and bitterness of a mother learning to love her eldest daughter (and vice versa); on unlearning resentment, on becoming kind, on becoming women together.*

## **mama (or: arachne.)**

i lived my life in the intersections  
of her silver web.

held my breath  
over bridges,  
followed mama's web  
through the dark sky reserve  
where the stars gave me my voice.

we lived among siamese houses  
where water spoke in stuttering sighs,

a town of 1,000 damned by the concrete whakapapa  
that gave it life  
and hushed the roar of water.

no bridges to speak of  
but i held my breath and held my breath and held my breath.

i was the river's melancholy silence  
flowing between the shelves  
of the church-controlled school library.

we were kin  
in our silence,  
the beautiful and the damned,  
everyone like us was  
taboo, taboo, taboo.

i was too old for silken nests,  
*(i was too young to be taboo, taboo, taboo.)*

the locals had never seen  
a silver so bright  
even in the stars who held my voice  
even in the water who nursed my silence.

i sung to the stars  
and spun my story with silver silk,  
dotted my i's times eight.  
the four points of a t scarred a silver trinity into my arms

but in the way of arachnids and waterways  
i never needed a father.

i was familiar with my own ghosts,  
i knew deep down  
i would never have a son.

silver silk      silver skin      silver stars      were all the odds i needed  
to double the meaning.      four points of a t became eight,  
the gentle pressure of mama's limbs  
holding me.

**south dunedin symphony**

come back often enough to remember the language  
of old bricks and salted roads  
of blemished spoons        and dead cats  
i  
was too young to understand.

2 dollars for a plastic baggie of sour bricks on  
the way to school from the  
dairy next to  
chanel's house        in all her  
golden        tumbledown glory.

south dunedin symphony ,  
dad stepped outside and  
smoked cigarettes and  
came inside smelling green.  
washed my clothes before i went back to mums  
dyed my white shirts pink accidentally  
and i loved him for it

came inside smelling green and bearing  
the weight of that    unchic anklet.

south dunedin symphony at least  
it was not sixteen year olds on the synthetic  
stuff anymore just  
dad and his synthesisers and  
stolen samples from singers he could not afford  
to pay in        sympathy.

we made stop motion videos  
they pressed        against the corners of my mind like  
sour sugar fingertips on  
cold windowpanes .

something belonged to me  
within the        jumping actors /  
neon orange plasticine.

they smelt green        the story was always  
missing pieces  
the house was missing bricks –  
but its a good thing  
its a good thing.

south dunedin sympathy  
sixteen year olds        stocking up  
on bricks        until    until

(the story is missing pieces)

i was too young to know;  
the house was missing bricks.

unfed and pink save for sour sugar sucked from  
bricks and baggies  
at school  
i hid in the bathroom  
from the skin and bones boys  
who called me a druggy, talked about  
shooting up and sex and my mum

the boys  
asked to see my bruises but the only colour  
my family gave me was the pink of my shirt  
and the green floating above me.  
i was floating above me too  
missing pieces.

kaela  
crawled under the stall door  
and couldn't understand  
neither could i. the washing machine broke  
i smelt green. i got violent and again  
its like, where  
is this memory coming from twisting my  
fingers in lucas' greasy hair  
never kick a man while he's down  
a boy is fine.

scotts brother says hit me harder  
i kick so hard he cries got wide  
eyed teary eyed i smelt  
green the teachers were kinder  
than they shouldve been;  
troubled kids trouble kids but nobody  
said that word to me cause i was smart  
and i  
was too young to know.

i came home to caversham and houses  
with all their brown bricks perfect, two stories and  
green doors. south dunedin symphony  
died down cats alive and spoons unblemished  
at the foot of the cutlery drawer

pink shirt grass stained so mama  
couldn't smell the green (i

think she wouldve                    been relieved if that  
                 was all / dad    turning over a new leaf,  
passing the torch                    to a daughter who can throw  
a punch and    a mother who's  
stop motion memory               didnt teach her not to.)

**effigy of the women (who raised me).**

out on the water, the girls are fighting.  
rain beats down on the chopped gray ocean,  
she's in a downward spiral, she's completing her destiny,  
she's had a bad morning.

the sea begs for peace, but she was taught to refuse refuge.

one day, they'll meet here again.  
rain now ocean feeling the displacement,  
becoming her own puncture wounds  
in the way teenage girls  
and the heartbroken  
and heartbroken teenage girls do.

ocean now rain  
crying as she falls,  
as mothers and exes and mother's exes do;  
i never meant to hurt you,

(i could love you  
but i do not like you enough  
to grant you peace  
in this moment.)

in a storm, nobody is reflective.  
ocean once rain once ocean once rain  
choked up on sediment and salt;  
refused refuge from rain once ocean once rain once ocean  
too busy fighting to worry about beauty  
as teenage girls and mothers  
and mothers of teenage girls do.

**unmade.**

before my life  
became measured by human needs and dreams  
my mother told me to make  
beds,  
bodies,  
homes.

she folded terse hospital corners  
in hopes she would be asked  
into caustic, chlorinated cells.  
she got drunk on the faux power of belonging,

i lost my grandfather's last words.

let unmade men in unmade beds hold me  
while i didn't cry  
and didn't cry  
and didn't cry.

my daughter  
will learn not to linger underfoot  
in the caustic way i was taught,  
our familiar prints spiteful  
of unintelligible whorls.

at my decree  
our bloodline diverges.

means are unmade  
to the same end,  
the cycle breaks  
before we begin again.

**unrestricted.**

in another universe,  
the bus doesn't come.

i stare at the golden hotel until the city is asleep,  
wander past the store that's probably a front on the corner of the clyde building,  
break into a car at the toyota dealership.

someone's left the keys in the ignition.

i don't like driving in the city  
i can't drive in the city; i never learned to drive in the city –  
but the bus didn't come.

and even if it did the fare's doubled.

and even if it didn't my skin is burning.

and even if it didn't,

i don't want this street of golden hotels and motor lodges.

i want the west coast under my right hand like a guardrail.

i want to run my finger along the spine of the southern alps and clean the icy dust from their  
peaks.

my mother taught me everything i know  
and i can't drive in the city here without her,

but she lies over the mountains  
where the sun sets golden on the tasman  
and green flashes appear to smooth liars and strong believers.

she taught me everything i know,  
made me all i am –  
i see the magic in everything,

i see the belief in her eyes  
as they flash from green to brown and back again.

i know my way home to her.