



AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Rosalie Sue Krenger for the Master of Arts

in English presented on April 6, 2016

Title:

Salted Earth: An Original Fiction Manuscript and Ecofeminist Analysis of the

Monstrous Childless Woman Trope

Thesis Chair: Amy Sage Webb

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

The thesis “Salted Earth: An Original Fiction Manuscript and Ecofeminist Analysis of the Monstrous Childless Woman Trope” seeks to examine the stigma that surrounds the social construction of barrenness, and explores the relationship between infertility and feminine identity. The critical foreword analyzes the representation of fertility and childlessness in western culture through an ecofeminist lens and asserts that the naturalization rhetoric surrounding the issue is perpetually reinforced through cultural artifacts and is particularly damaging to barren women. The foreword also investigates the depiction of childless women as monstrous and “other” in the selected works of Aimee Bender, Margaret Atwood, and Judy Budnitz. The original fiction manuscript, “Salted Earth,” consists of four short stories that explore the relationship of barrenness to character identity and attempt to subvert the monstrous childless woman archetype.

Keywords: Magic Realism, Folk Tale, Barren, Myth, Science Fiction, Naturalization

SALTED EARTH:

An Original Fiction Manuscript and Analysis of the Monstrous Childless Woman Trope

-----

A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of English, Modern Languages, and Journalism

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

-----

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

-----

by

Rosalie Sue Krenger

April 2016

---

Approved by the Department Chair

---

Committee Member

---

Committee Member

---

Committee Member

---

Dean of the Graduate School and Distance Education

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking Professor Amy Sage Webb for her tireless patience and unwavering support when I needed it, and for giving me encouragement and a good push when I needed it more. I would also like to thank Dr. Kevin Rabas and Dr. Rachelle Smith for their help with this and other projects throughout the years, and their patience with me as I labored to complete this thesis. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, my brother, and my husband for their support and understanding.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements .....   | iii |
| Table of Contents .....  | iv  |
| Critical Introduction  |     |
| Awkward Silence: The Rhetoric of Childlessness.....                        | 1   |
| Lamia’s Offspring: The Monstrous Childless Woman Trope in Literature ..... | 10  |
| Metaphorically Speaking: Contextualizing the Manuscript .....              | 22  |
| Works Cited .....  | 25  |
| Creative Works   |     |
| Empty Bellies .....  | 27  |
| Valued Customer .....  | 36  |
| Sacred Spaces .....  | 52  |
| Cast Off .....   | 65  |

AWKWARD SILENCE:  
THE RHETORIC OF CHILDLISSNESS

Western society employs an anthropocentric worldview, regarding humankind as the central or most significant entities on the planet, and assesses the value of things in relation to human needs, ideologies, and experiences. This philosophy enforces a logic of domination, a framework within which those in power seek to justify the oppression of those without power or agency by assigning arbitrary valuation to people and objects, imposing a naturalized binary of either useful or useless. In order for something to have value in such a culture, it must be productive, meaning it must serve a purpose or act as a resource to support and further humanity. Such a commodities-based ideology views nature as a resource, to be used and extracted, and such practices as a “natural” order of life.

One problem that stems from this perspective is that Western culture has also adopted the belief that women are closely related to nature, much more so than their male counterparts. This idea is reflected in cultural artifacts such as movies and books. Even the image of mother earth suggests dualist constructions of “culture as male and nature as female that have proven to be destructive for women and for nature” (Sturgeon 44).

This belief may not seem detrimental to women, but when considering the dichotomy between nature and civilization, it becomes clear that by placing women in the “nature” role, the implication is that men belong in the civilized role, thereby distancing women from civilization, which is a distinctly human enterprise; essentially, pushing women closer to nature implies that women are somehow less human than men.

This type of gendered ecocritical thinking, although present in cultural artifacts dating back thousands of years, really started to become prominent in the middle ages, when western culture began structuring itself primarily around patriarchal JudeoChristian religious systems which generally recognize four essential characteristics of human nature: the material, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual (Griffin 40). These characteristics, still pillars of our understanding of human nature today, are generally valued in ascending order, with the material being the least important/desirable and the spiritual being the pinnacle of humanity. Unfortunately, this mode of thinking separates the sexes into a gendered hierarchy because men were associated with the intellectual and the spiritual, closest to a transcendent God figure, while women were associated with the emotional and the material, closer to nature and the animal. The logic of domination would hold that women are therefore beneath men and that their dominion over women is “natural.” This arbitrary social construction soon became an established cultural norm in western ideology, and naturalized the subjugation of women.

This type of rhetoric that we use to connect arbitrary social institutions to nature, and thereby imply that they are natural, is problematic at both a moral and social level. As Noël Sturgeon points out, the very idea of “the natural” and “nature,” and the subsequent implied distinction between nature and culture, is a tool for power. The argument that a situation or idea is natural tends to preclude other arguments. Thus, labeling something as “natural” tends to justify social assumptions and behaviors that perpetuate marginalization and exploitation. As Sturgeon puts it:

The effect of the legitimating function and long historical dominance of this set of contradictory ideas about nature is that westerners often use the



idea of the natural to justify either the way things are or the way we think things should be. To say that some phenomenon is “natural”... seems to settle the question for many people. Not surprisingly, arguments from the natural often settle the question for those who benefit from the social arrangement in question; tragically, these arguments can sometimes also convince those who suffer from inequality and exploitation to accept their situation. (Sturgeon 20)

This naturalization rhetoric has been so omnipresent that even many origin myths (Mother Nature, Mother Earth, and Gaea) attempt to paint a relationship between nature and women as somehow divine. This type of naturalization rhetoric elevates, and thus reinforces the belief not only that women are tied closely to nature, but that it's a good thing.

This naturalized cultural construction of women as closer to nature puts them in a dangerous position. Through an ecocritical lens, in a commodities-driven culture the logical argument becomes that if women are close to nature, and nature is there to be used as a resource, then women are also there to be used as a resource. Nature is seen as productive when it can provide some function, such as bearing crops or livestock, and women are considered productive if they can bear children. This commodifies women's wombs, and the children they bear, as resources sought after and fought over. This belief implies, also, that if women don't have children they aren't contributing anything to society, and are therefore worthless. This correlation between women-as-resource and fertility-as-production continues to be perpetuated throughout Western culture and is evident in the social expectations for women.

Western women are expected to have/act upon the drive to establish monogamous, heteronormative relationships, have children, and stay home to raise them while their husbands provide. Essentially women are expected to desire to be utilized (Kuperberg). There is little sociobiological evidence, though, to support the belief that women have a natural biological drive to have children. The rhetoric used to naturalize this view is that having children is something distinctly feminine, and women are tied to nature, so it follows that having children is the natural thing for women to do. It may be just as likely, however, that the desire to be a mother stems from the need to adhere to cultural norms than from a biological drive, and that the social expectation that women *should* want to be mothers is enough to make most women conform to the idea that they *do* want to be mothers. This is because childbearing, specifically in the traditional nuclear family setting, is so synonymous with womanhood, and thus portrayed as natural, that women who do not conform are seen as unnatural. Women who do not adhere to these expectations also lose some personal agency and social influence; they are seen as antagonistic toward social norms, and therefore society. Thus they are denied some of the respect and support that mothers earn through their compliance.

Femininity and fertility are often thought of as natural consequences of one another, but the trouble with considering women as resource truly begins to manifest when taking into consideration women who don't or can't have children. Even the vocabulary used to talk about a woman's reproductive capabilities is nearly identical to that which is used to discuss nature's usefulness as a resource or commodity to further human enterprise: both women and land can be fertile, fruitful, fecund, and productive. Where land bears fruit or crops, women bear children. Where one can harvest crops from

land, one can also harvest eggs from a woman. Similarly, when approaching nature from commodity based anthropocentric ideology, women and land that can't produce are represented as arid, barren, and even hostile.

If the language used to reference women's fertility mirrors the language used to reference land as resource – friendly or hostile, then the implication is that they are seen and treated the same way. If infertile land is discussed as worthless in a commodities based ideology, then this reinforces the social construction of childless women as worthless as well. The word “barren,” for example, when applied to a place (e.g. farmland) is defined as “bleak and lifeless; empty of meaning or value.” A few of the synonyms that accompany the definition are: pointless, worthless, valueless, hollow, and purposeless. And yet men who are unable to reproduce are referred to as “sterile”; even the connotation of that word sets men as closer to science and medicine, and therefore to civilization than women, and rather than worthless, makes them sound clean, washed free of any culpability in proliferation of the species, again bringing into focus to the separation between men/culture and women/nature.

In addition to the dichotomy that the vocabulary used to discuss the issues of women as nature and resource, and thus as useful or worthless, is the way infertility is often presented as a female issue. It is so ingrained in Western culture that it is a woman's problem that when one study interviewed married infertile couples to examine the way that couples construct the reality of their infertility the results were that couples, both as a unit and separate people, tend to see infertility as the wife's problem and perceive the effects of it differently as well. While women generally felt that the failure to conceive meant that they had failed in their role as wife and woman, men

tended to see it as unfortunate, but not a tragedy, and not reflective of them as a person (Greil, Lietko, and Porter). The perception of this as a “woman” issue is part of a cyclical discourse – one in which representation (i.e. books, movies, media, etc.) of what is believed to be a reality serve as touchstones that consumers turn to in order to understand how society works, which then reinforce their initial belief.

In addition to valuing or devaluing women based on their fertility, considering women as natural puts them at risk when they aren’t productive. This is because when a natural region is unproductive it is generally considered worthless, and utilized as a zone of sacrifice. These are spaces that are viewed as sterile, and even hostile, and therefore can be destroyed for other purposes if they’re not productive in a “natural” way (Sturgeon 96). For example, if a field is not productive because it can’t sustain crops or livestock, it is useless as a natural piece of land. Because humans can’t profit from it in its “natural” state it may be more valuable to humanity to replace the natural area with civilization, perhaps by building a parking structure, or using the area for commercial producers to dump chemical waste. As Sturgeon points out, we often attempt to sacrifice these natural regions under the guise of advancing society, thus turning an unproductive zone into a productive one. Most often, this is done by using the area as a military testing ground for bombs or disposal of nuclear waste. (Sturgeon 95-96). Destroying nature (female) in this way is seen as acceptable because it advances civilization (male).

Because of the rhetoric which so closely ties women and nature together, the logic that what is not productive is not useful and therefore an acceptable sacrifice is often applied to women as well. Rather than a zone of sacrifice, childless women are often treated as a social sacrifice. This means that while barren land may be turned into a

shopping mall, barren women are turned into scapegoats and depicted as cultural manifestations of halted progress. In cultural artifacts they are used to represent the unnatural and the anti-social, a characterization most likely based on cultural preceptions of childless women.

The belief is so pervasive that fertility affects what kind of woman you are that one researcher found that whether or not a woman had children affected the way others perceived nearly every part of her life: when subjects encountered the description of a woman without children she was “rated as less sensitive and loving, less typical an American woman, more likely to be active in women's liberation, less happy, less well-adjusted, less likely to get along with her parents, and less likely to be happy and satisfied at age 65 relative to an otherwise identical description of a mother of two” (Jamison, Franzini, and Kaplan). Taken in conjunction with the commoditizing naturalization rhetoric used to speak about women, these perceptions serve to justify the marginalization, or social sacrifice, of childless women.

The portrayal of childless women as actively working against society because she is unable or unwilling to reproduce has manifested itself in the form of the depictions of childless women as unnatural, evil, or tools for evil, and generally “other.” This arises from the unfortunate truth is that women are so closely linked with nature that when they aren’t productive, or in this case reproductive, they are not only seen as less socially acceptable, but as somehow less human.

This view itself is predicated on a contradictory logic that stems from the perception of women as nature and reproduction as resource. Rather than viewing women who can’t produce as less close to nature, and therefore more like a man/civilized, when a

woman does or cannot bear children, she is instead pushed further away from humanity. Remove a woman from the established gender hierarchy that revolves around the domestic sphere, and she becomes both at once unnatural and super-natural, so close to nature as to become animalistic and therefore even less human than her child-bearing counterparts. Often, in literature and film this is exaggerated, and the perception of childless women as unnatural becomes the depiction of childless women as supernatural.

While scholars theorize that the idea of childless women as somehow monstrous in ancient Greece, the portrayal of childless women as other, as witches specifically, began gaining traction in the middle ages (McGuire, Anderson and Gordon). While literature and film may present childless women as evil witches, who preyed on children and undermined the social fabric of our culture that particular archetype is based in reality.

Historically, women who were having trouble conceiving would find another unproductive woman and attempt to place the blame elsewhere, naming another childless woman “witch,” decrying that woman’s jealousy and evil intentions, and thus sacrificing someone else so that she herself could not be held at fault for failing to produce new members of society (Anderson and Gordon). Barren women worked so well as a scapegoat for childless women, that soon they were held responsible not only for the arid wombs of other women, but for the viability of children who were born to fertile women, the fruitfulness of the crops, and the fecundity of livestock. The trope of a childless woman as evil has become so pervasive in our cultural artifacts that nearly all of our female villains, for example wicked witches and evil queens, are women without children who attack the good (i.e. natural) women in their stories and covet their children. Yet,

even these disparaging tropes serve to enforce the idea that the true natural drive for women is to have children.

In the real world, women who are unable to have children have little social agency – a power dynamic that stems from centuries old Judeo Christian patriarchal social structures in which social status (i.e. power/agency) is given to a woman by a man when she bears him children, thereby making her a legitimate woman (Spoto). In fictitious works, however, the childless woman retains the agency she shouldn't have as an "illegitimate" or unnatural woman in the form of magical powers. In stories these powers – a literal manifestation of "unnatural" agency – are invariably used to get children for the one who wields it, (often to eat or use as slaves), or to prevent others from having children (often by literally taking the child after it's born.)

Essentially in these stories, childless women, despite all their power, attempt to gain legitimacy for themselves by taking or harming the children of other women, essentially relegating children to a social currency of power. Aside from the magic, this could be considered an allegory for the naturalization of women/nature and reproduction/resource. It's apparent that the cultural discourse of socially expected motherhood naturalizes the disempowerment of women and marginalizes childless women as monsters. Perpetuating the depictions of women as natural or unnatural, based upon whether or not they bear children, subtly enforces the cultural myth of the "natural" order of things. It serves as a tool of power to legitimize arbitrary constructions of inequality which privilege certain elements of, and people in, our culture over others.

LAMIA'S OFFSPRING:  
THE MONSTROUS CHILDLESS WOMAN ARCHETYPE IN LITERATURE

Enforcing and perpetuating the naturalization rhetoric of female fertility is the trope of the monstrous childless woman in literature. This construction of childless women as less than human has pervaded western literature since the classical Greek era with the introduction of one of the first barren women – Lamia. As Linda McGuire points out, the only social roles of women in ancient Greece were to bear children (sons, specifically), and to share their fertility in rites performed for the good of both people and crops. An infertile woman could contribute nothing to society, and so was seen as a drain on scarce resources that could be put to better use by productive women. These “useless” women were linked in the cultural mentality with the monstrous women of legend who not only didn't contribute to society but who actively worked against it. It's very likely that the character of Lamia was modeled on social beliefs and implications of female infertility of the time, and that the character of Lamia is the first iteration of the monstrous childless woman trope in literature that stems from the view of women as nature, and thus as resource. As a character, Lamia echoes the cultural conceptions of childless women in ancient Greek patriarchal structure in which a woman's value was determined by her productivity, and her fertility was her only real currency.

As with any myth, there are some variations to the tale of Lamia, but the overarching tale follows thus: originally the beautiful, human queen of Libya, Lamia consorted with Zeus. In retaliation for their transgression, Zeus' wife Hera both kills (or in some versions, forces Lamia to kill) Lamia's children, and curses her with the inability to bear more. Hera goes on to curse Lamia to thereafter be unable to close her eyes, and



to be tormented by the death of her children. Zeus, in an attempt at kindness, gives her the ability to remove her eyes so she can rest, a trick that brings with it the gift of prophecy (Graves 189-190). The myth goes on to show the transformation of Lamia into a vengeful, horrid woman who would descend upon and kill growing crops, and who stole, killed, and often devoured children (and sometimes mothers) wherever she found them – the act of which deformed her face to be as monstrous as her actions (McGuire). The snake tail wouldn't be added until later, but became a part of her myth, simultaneously tying her closer to nature while increasing how unnatural she was. Another repercussion of the snake tail is that she is linked to the serpent in Judeo-Christian mythology, inherently suggesting her very nature is to be deceitful and manipulative, and to undermine the God-ordained order of things.

The first barren woman character in western literature embodies the tropes of the childless woman who is tied to failing crops, is jealous of the offspring of other women, who wishes to harm and abduct children, who is physically deformed or hideous, and has supernatural powers. Every trope of monstrous barren women is held in a single, ancient story that has been shared and reshaped for centuries. Lamia became the archetype for childless women in literature.

One of the particularly damaging elements of the Lamia myth that has survived, while not often directly addressed, is that Lamia's barrenness and subsequent monstrous transformation are a punishment; one that is perceived as justly deserved and meted out by a divine being. While the blame for infertility is not often placed directly on the barren woman, the animosity Hera felt toward Lamia has carried forward into readers, where it manifests as lack of sympathy for childless women. Because the parts of Lamia that make

her monstrous were inexorably tied to her childlessness – symptoms of both her anger and her punishment - her transformation into something no longer human has morphed into the treatment of childless women as also somehow not, or even less than human.

That link seems evident in nearly every image and story of childless women, so much so that in addition to myth, the monstrous childless woman trope is now an accepted, even expected, part of many of the genres that inform western literature. The childless women are traditionally ugly, magical, covetous, and jealous. While the Lamia archetype may have originated in ancient Greece, all of these characteristics harken back to the way western culture perceives childless women today as less feminine, less nurturing, and unnatural. Similarly, just as an Ecocritical view of women-as-resource holds that childless women are not productive members of society and are therefore other, monstrous childless women in stories tend to live alone, physically separated from the rest of humanity.

In folk and fairy tales, for example, the archetype persists in the evil witch who lives in the woods, luring children away to do them harm. For example, the folk tale “Hansel and Gretel,” tells the story of a brother and sister who are left in the woods to fend for themselves when their parents are no longer able to feed them. The story goes that the children overhear their stepmother’s plan to abandon them when they are supposed to be asleep, and Hansel sneaks out to gather stones to fill his pockets. After successfully following a trail of the stones home, their stepmother ensures that they are unable to do so a second time by locking them in the house overnight. The children’s father gives them a loaf of bread before attempting to lead them out into the wood a second time, and so in lieu of stones the children drop bread crumbs. In the Brothers

Grimm retelling of the story it is not many birds, but one in particular, that eats all of the crumbs before enticing the children to follow it deeper in the woods. The bird, a white raven, leads them to its master's house, a cottage made of sweetbread and candy. The children gorge themselves before being caught by the blind old witch who has lured them there and literally means to eat the children, much like in the Lamia myth. The witch is eventually defeated when Gretel successfully tricks her and shoves her into the oven. The pair then steals the witch's treasure and find their way home, where their stepmother has died and the famine is over.

While the Grimm story doesn't paint vivid portraits of any of its characters, the story clearly suggests that it is more heinous for a woman, in this case both the witch and the children's stepmother, to choose not to care for the children than it is for a man, since, even though he was party to the abandonment, the children return to their father laden with treasure and all is forgiven, while the women both die. While "Hansel and Gretel" doesn't seem to investigate or give commentary on the social issue of childlessness, the witch closely parallels the Lamia archetype by living alone, being ugly, evil, magical, child devouring, and blind. Similarly, it is the stepmother, a woman who doesn't have children of her own, who put the children in danger in the first place. This folk tale, and others like it, is so ingrained in Western culture that they are some of the first stories children learn, further enforcing the idea that childless women do not belong to the same society that the rest of us do.

There are many images in literature of childless women as evil, unnatural beings, and while some authors attempt to subvert, or at least address, those tropes to reshape how the story of barren or childless women is told, the archetype still persists,

perpetuating the trope of the unnatural woman whose evil actions stem from a desire for, or jealousy of, the normalized family life and children that a “natural” woman has.

The magic realism novel *If I told you Once*, by Judy Budnitz, adapts multiple classic fairy and folk tales, reshaping them into a more fully realized world that allows for a closer look at the childless women who are usually depicted as nothing more than blank monster masks. The childless women in the novel are not portrayed as necessarily good, nor are they portrayed as heartless or purposefully evil. Each character has their own drives and ambitions that shape their actions, and maintain a sense of agency. The novel only strips the characters slightly of the blame/animosity associated with the Lamia archetype, but Budnitz’s childless women characters are multifaceted, and not limited strictly to the role of monstrous childless woman.

The novel follows four generations of women in a single family, beginning with Ilana, a poor Jewish girl from a remote, unnamed village. Ilana begins her story as a re-imagined red riding hood who leaves the village and chances upon Baba, an old witch in the woods who takes on the role of the witch in several folk and fairy tales. For example, reminiscent of the story of Rapunzel, Baba keeps a young woman named Anya prisoner, and forces her to grow extremely long, beautiful hair. Baba is the first place in the novel we see the Lamia myth and monstrous childless woman trope appear. While Baba doesn’t directly seek out and wish to harm children, she does dispense emmenagogues (abortifacient herbs used to stimulate blood flow to the womb) to women who seek her out, effectively remaining in the role of child-killer.

Ilana eventually rescues Anya, not from Baba, but from the men who kill her in an effort to possess Anya. She goes on to travel throughout the unnamed country meeting

new iterations of folk and fairy tale characters. As with Baba, many of the people Ilana meets embody more than one folk or fairy tale, but some are clearly intended to represent one character in a new way. For example, Ilana meets a female Bluebeard who marries men, tests their faithfulness, and kills them when they fail. Eventually Ilana meets and falls in love with a boy, who is himself a manifestation of several folk tales such as the Pied Piper, and the two of them journey to America where they marry and build a family.

Here the novel begins to follow not only Ilana, but her daughter Sashie as well, and subsequently her granddaughter Mara, and her great-granddaughter Nomie. The novel largely moves away from traditional folk and fairy tales once Ilana's daughter is old enough to add to the narrative, but it remains in the genre of magical realism; the extraordinary and absurd still happens and is accepted without rationalization on the part of the characters. While the novel leaves the folk and fairy tale stories behind in the old world, though, the monstrous childless woman trope persists.

For example, Ilana's granddaughter Mara, who is childless and single, harbors an obsession with her brother. After finding that he has fallen in love with another woman, Mara begins to change to fit the trope. She covets her brother's child, Nomie, not because she wants children of her own, but because she harbors an obsession with her brother and sees the child as a part of him she can have. What's more, she sees Nomie as something she can take from her brother's wife in retaliation. Mara is not magical in any sense of the word, nor does she successfully tempt her brother away from his wife, nor does she do any harm to Nomie, much less kill her. However, she does exemplify the image of childless women in literature as the evil, ugly crone.

Anyia, too, appears again in the novel years her escape with Ilana, and has begun

to fulfill some of the tropes. She is childless, but she does not harm the children of others. She becomes a match maker, pairing women and men for marriage for a fee, which, in some ways, is an echo of what Baba, the first childless woman in the story, does by taking payment to give young women who seek her out what they think they want. While Anya was beautiful as a girl, because she never becomes a mother her looks become a grotesque imitation of what she once looked like. For example, her once silky auburn hair becomes a harsh dyed red, and even her amputated legs (Baba removed Anya's feet because they were frostbitten and gangrenous,) were portrayed as the mark of a damsel in need of rescue when she was young, but as an older woman her artificial legs are noted only for the fact that they look wrong and make her lumber through the streets with a hard thump. What were once soft curves that Ilana envied become fat rolls. Other childless characters, such as the female Bluebeard, are monstrous in their own right.

In addition to Budnitz's traditional fairy and folk tale characters, which break away from the myth a bit at a time, other contemporary authors also work with the Lamia archetype in the magical realism genre. For example, another story that allows for the magnified examination of the tropes surrounding childless women through the use of the genre is Amy Bender's "Dearth." In the story the unnamed protagonist, upon finding that her cast iron pot is filled with potatoes, attempts to get rid of them, only to have them keep reappearing. As the story progresses the potatoes begin to take the shape of fetuses and her determination not to keep them grows stronger. However, when she eventually succeeds in getting rid of the first one, she becomes disheartened. The eventual acceptance of the potato children is not really celebrated, but quietly observed when the protagonist seems to acknowledge that her dead mother would want events to unfold the

way they did, as she is reminded of their lost relationship.

It is implied that those around her see the protagonist's initial childlessness as wrong. It's not until she begins to accept that she's going to have children that she feels confident when talking to her neighbor – a woman who has been receiving flowers from the men she dates. The symbolism of the flowers suggests that the neighbor is both fertile and actively trying to follow established social patterns, unlike the protagonist who is established as comparatively less attractive. It is also once she has accepted her new children that people she meets in the neighborhood are polite to her when she passes, and when she must stop justifying parts of her existence to others. It is also at this point that she is better able to accept the cyclical nature of life. She gains peace with her mother's death, and knows that motherhood is what her parents would have wanted for her. The babies in Bender's story grow from potatoes, an element which enforces the connection between the productivity of nature and of women. Since potatoes are both hardy and a root vegetable, though, this suggests that the protagonist was never going to be able to deny something (motherhood) that was itself at the root of who her parents and neighbors want her to be.

While the method of "procreation" in Bender's story is certainly not conventional, that is not the focus of this magical realism story. Magical realism approaches the subject of childlessness in a way that otherwise might not be possible. Use of the genre allows the symptoms and issues of social ills manifest overtly and quickly, and calls to attention the absurdity of naturalized social constructions, for example, the way women are treated based on whether or not they want to, can, or do have children. Magical realism investigates how humans navigate the worlds they are placed in, and explores the

emotional responses of characters. It is not the situations presented in the stories with which the characters must deal, but how and if they can handle their own responses to the issues. The structural brevity employed in magical realism forces readers into immediate and absolute acceptance of the fantastical world the story takes place in, and thus of the emotional and social anxieties that are made manifest in the conflicts the characters must face. This means, for example, that in “Dearth” the naturalization rhetoric surrounding childbearing (that it is natural and right for a woman to want children) becomes the thing that the protagonist must act against, and her reactions to being forced into the unattractive, socially excluded woman is what the story is really meant to investigate.

In addition to these magical realism stories, authors in other genres also utilize the monstrous childless woman trope. In one of the clearest examples of the Lamia archetype as representative of women-as-resource rhetoric, Margaret Atwood’s speculative fiction novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, follows the story of Offred through a society populated primarily by monstrous childless women.

The narration balances the insightful, sometimes poetic thoughts of Offred, the main character, with a harsher, factual recounting of the indecencies she suffers as a handmaid. The novel moves back and forward through time, constructing a near-future world in which a majority of the population is infertile. Women are relegated to six primary social roles. Highest, and safest, are the Wives, spouses of men who have earned them as symbols of their status. Below them, in a situationally fluid hierarchy, are the sisters who are charged with training and caring for other women, handmaids which are essentially government issued concubines, and workers such as maids and cooks. There are also prostitutes who are kept in a secret military getaway, and beneath all of them the



truly economically unviable women who are sent to the nuclear wasteland as cleanup crews, where they will quickly sicken from radiation poisoning and die.

The power structure is explicitly stated in some places, implied in others, and the assignment to and movement from most of the female castes is not clear for every woman. For the handmaids, however, their very lives depend upon their ability to bear children. Chosen because they have been able to conceive in the past, handmaids are housed with married couples in order to try and conceive the husband's child. If a handmaid is placed and fails to produce three times she is then discarded as useless and sent to the wasteland, which equates to a death sentence.

In the novel Offred attempts to live within the social and moral strictures that confine her, and begins cavorting with her master outside of the prescribed consummation rituals. In an effort to get pregnant, and at the urging of her master's wife, she also begins an affair with one of the soldiers under her master's command, a ploy which works. The last time Offred acts as narrator in the novel is when a covert resistance team rescues her and smuggles her to Canada.

Nearly every woman in the novel fulfills at least one of the tropes associated with the Lamia myth, but it is the wives who are most closely embodied by the monstrous childless women archetype. The wives in the novel are portrayed as jealous of fertile women, and covetous of children. They steal the children of the handmaids for their own in an effort to retain social legitimacy, and while there is no overtly addressed magic in the novel, the wives (and their husbands) subject the handmaids to rites and rituals reminiscent of fertility spells. In addition, while not made inherently ugly, the physical humanity of the women in the novel is largely removed. For example, the handmaids hide their form from

view at all times, relegating them to featureless red shapes, the help are all in blue, the wives in white.

The conclusion of the novel, framed in a scholarly address to a gathering of historians, is chilling in its own right – with the buffer of decades between the researchers and Offred’s experiences, they are able to make jokes about the society and casually reference the injustices that happened to her not as atrocities, but as fascinating societal quirks. The disjuncture between the last of Offred’s words and the analysis of them highlights the rather callous manner with which the dehumanization of barren women in literature is naturalized.

Part of what makes this particular occurrence of the Lamia myth so intriguing is the genre of the novel. While magical realism investigates a social issue at the personal-response level, speculative fiction tends to investigate those issues at the societal response level. Looking at the monstrous childless woman archetype in speculative fiction, for example, allows an exaggerated model of the contemporary commodities-based discourse that currently surrounds childlessness to be examined. Marleen Barr compares the handmaids in Atwood’s novel, who are powerless against an already established institutionalized power dynamic that denies women the control over their bodies and reduces them to a resource, with contemporary depictions of silent, sexualized women on TV, and urges readers to consider the feminist reproductive sci-fi as a warning rather than entertainment. She argues that when discussing reproductive technologies, the lines between feminist science fiction and realistic fiction become too blurred to accurately label the former as speculative. Rather, she maintains that Atwood’s sci-fi world is dangerously close to non-fiction, stating that in, “an empirical environment that

includes the reality of woman as birth machine, it becomes increasingly difficult for feminist science fiction writers to address reproductive technology in terms of science fiction; their imaginative frameworks regarding this technology are components of reality rather than alternatives to reality” (174).

Each of these examples utilize the Lamia archetype in different ways, using different tropes to convey a naturalized view of motherhood, childlessness, and having children, and the use of speculative fiction and magical realism allows the myth to be investigated at the social and personal level, respectively. The childless women in these stories are still born from the Lamia myth, portrayed as monstrous, and unless they are able to step out of that role, they remain without agency and unable to contribute anything to society. What’s more they are unable to start a new dialogue separate from motherhood because their very identities are still so tied up in the absence of it.

METAPHORICALLY SPEAKING:  
CONTEXTUALIZING THE MANUSCRIPT

The stories in this body of work – a reimagined folk tale, a near-future speculative fiction story, a myth, and a magic realism story – examine the role of barren women as “other.” The manuscript seeks to draw from and investigate the big questions surrounding the Lamia archetype and monstrous childless woman tropes: What does it mean to be a woman when you are infertile? Can you be a woman? What can you contribute to society when you can’t produce children?

This body of work enters into the tradition of portraying childless women as monstrous, and seeks to build upon it by employing infertility as a theme. The stories operate from an assumption that the portrayal of barren women has the opportunity to inform cultural norms by either adhering to established tropes, or refusing to naturalize the marginalization of childless women. While the stories employ the Lamia archetype, they seek to approach the role of childless women as victim and advocate of society rather than as aggressor. In addition to examining the dichotomy of fruitful/unproductive women and their perceived place in the world, these stories also involve personal power struggles of women who grapple with their identities as women, partners, and social entities as non-producers in a commodities-based cultural structure.

The genres of these stories allow the monstrous childless women archetype to be approached in different ways. The Lamia myth, for example, is the personification of the cultural notion of barren women as antagonistic toward a society for which they don’t produce anything, but only explains the origin of one childless woman. The myth in this collection seeks to offer an explanation for the origin of all childless women, and to

establish it in lore not as a curse, but as a blessing. The folk-tale genre clearly establishes the childless woman as a version of the Lamia myth. The folk tale story in this collection also employs the established tropes of the childless woman as magical, living separate from society, jealous of women who are able to produce, and violent toward children, but deviates from the traditional folk tale in that it resituates the childless woman as protagonist.

While the folk tale and myth stories seek to approach the monstrous childless woman archetype in a different way, the speculative fiction and magical realism pieces attempt to employ genre conventions to examine the implications of the Lamia myth. An element of speculative fiction which allows the archetype to be examined differently than it is in other genres is its portrayal of technology in sci-fi as synonymous with human progress rather than as a technical solution to an adaptive challenge. A technical solution, for example a tool or actionable plan, does not address the root of an adaptive challenge, as it is a problem that requires a fundamental societal shift in ideology to remedy. For example, simply supplying childless women with alternative avenues for obtaining children will not change the fundamental nature of a society that values women who produce, and discards those who don't, nor does it negate the perception of women who are unable to produce themselves.

While viewing the Lamia myth through a speculative fiction lens allows for an examination of the social implications of naturalization rhetoric, magical realism is employed in an effort to exaggerate and investigate the personal implications of the naturalized social construction of childlessness as unnatural by examining the effects that the socially instilled desire for motherhood has on a subject's emotional state and social

relationships. By employing literal metaphor in this genre the social stigma is made manifest and thus the protagonist can physically grapple with it, and eventually escape.

## WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Alan, and Raymond Gordon. "Witchcraft and the Status of Women -- the Case of England". *The British Journal of Sociology* 29.2 (1978): 171–184. Web.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1986. E-book.
- Barr, Marleen. "Blurred Generic Conventions: Pregnancy and Power in Feminist Science Fiction." *Reproductive and Genetic Engineering* 1.2 (1988): 167-174. Web.
- Bender, Aimee. "Dearth." *Willful Creatures*. New York: Anchor Books, 2009. E-book.
- Budnitz, Judy. *If I Told You Once*. New York: Macmillan, 2000. E-book.
- Graves, Robert. "Lamia." *The Greek Myths*. New York: Penguin, 1960. 189-190. Print
- Greil, Arthur L., Thomas A Leitko, and Karen L. Porter. "Infertility: His and Hers." *Gender and Society*, 2.2 (1988): 172-199. Web.
- Griffin, Wendy. "The Embodied Goddess: Feminist Witchcraft and Female Divinity." *Sociology of Religion* 56.1 (1995): 35–48. Web.
- Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. "Hansel and Gretel." *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales*. Garden City: Double Day, 1969. 102-107. Print.
- Jamison, Pollyann H., Louis Franzini, and Robert M. Kaplan. "Some Assumed Characteristics of Voluntarily Childfree Women and Men." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 4.2 (1979): 266-273. PDF.
- Kuperberg, Arielle, and Pamela Stone. "The Media Depiction of Women Who Opt Out". *Gender and Society* 22.4 (2008): 497–517. Web.
- McGuire, Linda. "From Greek Myth to Medieval Witches: Infertile Women as Monstrous and Evil." *Our Monstrous (S)kin: Blurring the Boundaries Between*

*Monsters and Humanity*. Ed. Sorcha Ni Fhlainn. Freeland: Inter-Disciplinary,  
2009. 135-152. PDF.

Spoto, Stephanie Irene. "Jacobean Witchcraft and Feminine Power". *Pacific Coast  
Philology* 45 (2010): 53–70. Web.

Sturgeon, Noël. *Environmentalism in Popular Culture*. Tucson: University of Arizona  
Press, 2009. 3-52, 120-148. Print.



## EMPTY BELLIES

Liesel had long ago mastered the clouds, pulling and shaping them as she fancied, willing them to weep and then daring them to laugh, cacophonous through their tears. She'd easily learned the slow, patient language of green things, and with a whisper persuaded the trees to root deep in the earth or fall, as she bade. She and the river would run fast and wild when the mood struck her, and the stones themselves would tremble when she walked, if she willed it. She had strolled, years ago, into these dark woods, where others fear to tread, and claimed them as her own before the sun had set that day.

And yet, she could feel failure looming, crowding her, watching over her shoulder, and some slight but significant part of her whispered, tired and tremulous, that at this simple thing she would fail. Again, and most likely always.

She stared through the small grate in the iron oven door, heat greedily drinking the sweat from her skin even as it beaded on her lip, and another part of herself, one that had grown wild and willful over the secluded years, shrieked at the mere suggestion of failure, growled at her that it would work, it must work, that simple women who had no inkling of the power she possessed, of what power even was, had managed to perform this miracle on accident in their ignorance, and that she – shaper of the wilds and mistress of the winds, would not, could not fail. That if she could run, certainly she could walk – and this one spell, this small, trifling thing – required no more than a few sure-footed steps.

That persistent, indignant voice continued to rail, tried to drown out the small certainty she would fail, and Liesel tried her best to ignore them both, and bent her mind

to the task – to will the materials in the oven to coalesce, to become something more than just so many parts.

In her mind's eye she tried to visualize a form, to force that mold around the shapeless husk in her oven through sheer force of will as her fingers traced the phantom of an outline; hands, feet, limbs, head, neck, and torso. She closed her eyes as she sifted through memories of the past and hopes for the future, trying to capture the diaphanous nuance of what it means to exist, to wrap her definition of self in strands of need and urgency. She hunched her shoulders, setting herself against the heat and pressed her hands to the oven door to send her thoughts into the baking form within. And although a small voice whispered fearfully in the back of her mind that it would come to no good, she made the decision to give herself over to the hope that this not-yet-existent being gave her in turn, to bind herself emotionally to the process, to commit, wholeheartedly, to giving this golem life. As soon as she made up her mind her lips began to shape the words, esoteric and arcane, that she hoped would build a soul. As she spoke the magic burned the back of her throat, sparking against her teeth as it streamed forth from her mouth into the oven, to shape the being in her oven into the being in her head, and urge it into life.

Some minutes passed once the spell was finished, and time moved in a strange slip-stream around her as she crouched, trembling, at the oven door. It felt at once as though she would be caught in this state of hopeful fear forever, never knowing what, if anything, her hard work wrought, and that all too soon, in no time at all, life as she knew it in this exact moment would be irrevocably changed.

She took a deep breath, pulled her mind out of that deep place, and time resumed

its flow, thrumming along parallel to the heart beat thundering in her ears and the ache creeping through her bones. Her hands shook as she turned the oven handle, and opened the door wide. She pulled the tray out smoothly, by now used to the burdensome weight. She placed it on the table, and in one fluid, familiar motion closed the oven and swept the knife from the counter.

“Live,” she whispered, her voice pleading, and hoarse from the power it had shaped.

She held her breath and pressed her ear to the warm, hollow chest; lifted the limp lump of what should have been a hand. She pressed softly on the featureless head, and finally, with a slow steady exhale, made the first careful slice into the hard outer shell, and gently prized the unmoving thing open to find nothing more than something akin to bread and clay where a body should have been.

It seemed that the wild arrogance inside her had nothing to say, and in the silence she heard a noise not quite human escape from her throat before she could catch it. That timid, insistent voice, however, would not abandon her. It was not that kind.

As she wept she couldn't shut out the whispers that echoed through this familiar new emptiness: the truth she had known before she even began reverberated that this time, like every other time, that despite all her power, all her skill, she couldn't force life into something that was not meant to hold it.

Liesel allowed herself to wallow in grief for several hours, but by the end of that time she had no more patience for self-pity, and no more tears besides.

Her eyes burned from lack of sleep and her stomach burned with hunger. For days she had focused tirelessly on shaping this most recent disaster. But while she was

exhausted, and she'd chosen to forego her grief for the might-have-been, she couldn't abide the thought of waking in her small house with this carcass on her table. And so, stomach sour and eyes itching, she gathered the limp form of the would-be-child in her arms and carried it into the night.

She was dismayed, as always, that there were so many others to keep this one company as she stepped gingerly around the outside of her small house, searching for a good spot. There was no empty ground left close to the house, so she carried him to the edge of the woods, and stood with her miscarried attempt beneath a blanket of stars while she bade the earth to open and take it from her.

Liesel stood above the fresh grave for a long while, contemplating this and other dreams that had never lived, while the warring parts of herself argued with one another that she should give up, that she just needed to figure out the right ingredients, that she was fooling herself, that she was so close. It was just before dawn when she finally turned and went inside to record her notes. As the sun came up she collapsed into bed. She slept for days.

When she awoke the dying light of day was slipping quietly out of the room as shadow took its place. She gathered herself and looked around the small cottage, empty of anything save the silence, and she was reticent to shatter it with her quiet shuffling footsteps, and small noises of preparation. But as she sat, still and contemplative, that brazen yearning began to wind its way through her again, to insist that she get up, to demand that she start over, to remind her of who and what she was, and berate her for thinking she could be any kind of witch if she couldn't do something as simple as make bread rise.

That inner voice filled the hollow in her belly with surety and fire, and she made up her mind, as though she'd had a choice, to try again, and try harder

In the beginning she'd tried simple clay, but it had turned into nothing more than a person-shaped pot. She'd tried every command and word of power she knew, but to no avail. She'd experimented with adding reagents and alchemical ingredients, but they made the pottery flawed and fragile, and the homunculus cracked before it was even finished hardening. The closest she'd come to success was with a mixture akin to bread – wheat, yeast, eggs, herbs, water, and some other components. She'd modified the ingredients over and over again, tried sugar, snails, ginger and other spices, anything that she'd heard others had even a whisper of success with. She'd used up every magic item she could get her hands on, and tried altering the spell in every way she could think of. She'd tried to find that spark in herself, in the trees, in all the creatures in her woods that made them live and with each new attempt she'd felt that she was closer. And now, she knew, she was right on the verge – if she could just figure out that one certain something, that key ingredient that would make her creation live.

She spent the next weeks huddled inside during the day, only the dim light from her stove to see by as she strained her eyes studying her notes, she mixed and measured, charting the phases of the moon, the temperature, the humidity. By night she wandered, silent as cloud shadow, through her woods and down the mountain, through sleepy little villages, scavenging what little crops were left from moon-pale fields, gathering meager, rationed supplies while creeping into and out of houses while the owners slept, and dreamt of better lives.

She determined that this time she would shape the body beforehand, so she could

devote the whole of her mind to conjuring life, and when the moon began to wane she labored for days, shaping and building a new construct. She took more care than she ever had before to shape not just each hand, but each finger, and used leaves to make lifelines on the palms. She gave it, for the first time, a face, and chose pebbles, smooth and dark, from the river for the eyes. By the time the moon was new she was exhausted, but anxious to begin.

All that was left was gathering enough wood to feed the small fire inside the oven until it burned hot and bright enough to spark something else into being. Before she left she ran her hands over a smooth forehead, round cheeks and a kind mouth. She counted ten fingers and ten toes, making sure that each detail was perfect one more time

She took her time, moving gingerly through the benighted woods, willing the moss to cushion and quiet her every step, calling the cool wind to lift her hair from her neck.

She relished the kiss of moonlight on her skin, the relative silence in her mind as all the parts of herself drank in the evening. She sauntered between the trees, arms full of deadfall and shattered limbs, listening to the night pulse around her, the small living things moving to a rhythm that was at once familiar and new as she made her way slowly through the night.

As she stepped over a fallen log her chest began to tighten and her footsteps halted as the woods went silent. Something was wrong.

Someone was in her woods.

She hurried back toward her cottage, willing the tree branches to part so the meager moonlight could light her way. When she reached the edge of the clearing she

dropped the bundle of wood and inched her way to the open door.

As she reached to place one withered hand on the frame, a croaking giggle pierced the darkness. A chill licked slowly up her spine, trailing gooseflesh and sweat like spittle. She pushed the door open slowly, dreading what she would find.

Two creatures knelt on the table laughing in mad, lustful peals, as they tore into their feast, holding fistfuls high in triumph before shoving them into their gaping mouths.

She could not stop the sound that escaped her throat.

They turned to her as one, startled, and she watched the fear of her spread across their cadaverous faces, even as their skeletal fingers clawed again into the homunculus, scrabbling to fill their dirty pockets with dough, never mind the clay mixed in. Wild eyes in sunken sockets searched frantically around the room, looking for escape. Liesel could only stare in revulsion as the smaller of the two began to keel high and hysterical in the back of its throat, mouth falling open to reveal a masticated lump of flesh.

The larger one, a boy it seemed, took the chance to try and dive for the window, but his weakened limbs couldn't pull him up to the sill. She tried to yell at him to stop, but all that burst from her throat was a cry of despair. Startled, the boy spun like a cornered fox and lunged at her, dirty fingernails slashing at her face.

She screamed hoarsely as she felt the sticky, fleshy remains of the golem smeared across her cheek. She snatched at his little wrists, bone thin and hollow feeling. His eyes rolled around wildly, searching for an escape, while hers fixed on his hands, covered in the residue of yet another corpse.

She squeezed.

He took a breath as if to scream and she did it for him, howling in his face even as

his bones snapped in her grasp. She continued to squeeze until her own hands shook, and she dropped the child-thing, in a heap on the floor.

She turned to the remains on the table. She ran her hands over the chunked flesh and knew that too much was gone to reshape it. She hung her head and her gaze fell on the smaller creature, a girl, huddled in the corner. They locked eyes and Liesel saw something there – a spark of that certain something she hadn't been able to conjure. She saw fear.

The girl must have recognized something in Liesel's eyes, too, for with a screech she tried to skitter for the door. Liesel was across the small space in an instant, slamming her still trembling hand into the door to trap the creature inside with her.

She could still save her creation, turn the ravaged carcass on the table into the living thing it might have been. She caught the girl up and slammed her onto the table, next to the doughy clay. She reached inside herself to the place where her power pooled, and tried to tap the spark she'd seen in the girl.

The girl fought and shrieked, snarling at the arms that pinned her down. Liesel couldn't concentrate and that spark kept slipping from her grasp. In desperation she tried to grasp it physically, to reach into the girl, to claw her open as just so much more clay, but the girl was stronger than her emaciated limbs suggested, and as soon as Liesel let up with one hand the girl bucked, throwing her off balance. The girl was up in an instant, kicking and shoving the older woman.

Liesel stumbled, crashing blindly over a toppled chair, and she realized too late that she was falling toward the open oven door.

She hit the coals face and hands first. She'd had no time to will the heat away and



through the pain it was hard to separate her own screams from those of the children. The boy got hastily to his feet as she tried to push herself out of the oven, running headlong at her to shove her in despite his broken wrists. She tried to get to her feet in the small space, but it was hard to get her balance using her burning hands. Her thoughts became muddled. The clang of the oven door, though, was clear, and when she managed to find her footing, she could only turn so that her face was against the grate.

She watched, helpless, as the filthy girl-child wrapped her brother's wrists. She railed as they stoked the fire beneath her prison, and fed in the gathered wood. She screamed as they gorged themselves on the flesh of her failure. Ignoring her, they walked out into the night.

## VALUED CUSTOMER

Olivia sighed as the little tabletop hologram began to flicker again.

“Hello? Can you still hear me?” she asked, tapping lightly on the base. It needed to be replaced. She had thought that it would be the first thing she bought if she got this new job.

“Yes ma’am! I hear you.” The image of the sales rep stabilized and, satisfied that it wasn’t going to go out again, Olivia sat back from the display. “As I was saying, the longest lease we offer is twelve months, but we recommend that first time customers stick to 3 or 6 month terms. The cost, while it may seem steep ...”

Olivia nodded, but she was only half listening. As the rep continued his spiel she stared at the invitation in her hand. It seemed her old roommate had spared no expense; it was real paper, thick and blue with scalloped edges. It felt strange between her fingers.

“...and, of course, we do offer a 100% customer satisfaction guarantee should the product fail to live up to your expectations. Do you have any questions?” he asked.

Olivia shook her head. “No, I think I’ve heard all I need to.” She tossed the baby shower announcement on the table next to her designer handbag and now-empty Champaign bottle. “I’ll take the full starter package, rental insurance, and a 6 month lease.”

“Excellent!” She could tell the rep’s enthusiasm wasn’t forced, and for some reason that irritated her. “I’ll send a drone to collect a sample immediately after we process payment.” Olivia glanced at the not insignificant sum that popped up on the display, nodded, and keyed in her account information.

“Wonderful. Then the final thing we need to discuss is the non-disclosure

agreement.”

The starter kit arrived with the sample drone, which was handy, and Olivia settled into the baby’s room to decipher the directions for the crib. When she was sure that it was as safe and sturdy as it was going to get, she put the new bedding down and started on the rocker. She put together the mobile, washed and folded the onesies, hung up the jumpers. She double checked the childproofing, stowed the diapers, the wipes, the snot-suckers, the baby powder and the ointment. She placed the lamp on the dresser, along with the as-yet empty “mommy and me” picture frame. She put the formula in the kitchen cabinet, organized by expiration date, and arranged the bottles, bags, nipples, and measuring cups. She put everything, from the tiny fingernail clippers with the safety-guard to the giant stuffed giraffe, in its place before collapsing into the glider.

She was woken the next morning by her door bell. The daylight was harsh to her bleary eyes and she had trouble deciphering the drone’s data pad. She blinked hard a few times, and as soon as she could make out “Matirna, Inc.” it seemed the whole world snapped into focus, crystalline and sharp.

“Please acknowledge receipt,” droned the electronic voice.

Olivia was not prepared for this. She’d gotten everything put away, true, but she’d expected at least a week’s delay.

“Please acknowledge receipt,” it repeated.

Olivia’s hand trembled as she pressed her thumb to the pad. “Identity confirmed.” There was a click and the pod slid open, revealing a sleeping baby girl, her baby girl,

swaddled in a standard hospital-grade blanket.

Olivia's heart seized. The breath caught in her throat, and hot tears threatened to spill onto the newborn's soft, round cheeks as Olivia bent down to pick her up. Other than a small sigh, and gentle shake of her head, the baby made no sign that she minded being lifted. There was a data pad and bottle inside the pod. She just had time to readjust her grip on the infant and grab them with her free hand, before the pod slid closed with a harsh *schlick*.

"Thank you for choosing Matirna, Inc. Have a good day." And with that the pod sped away in a hushed whir.

She hardly noticed.

She carried the child inside, tossing the scratchy blanket on the couch. In the nursery she sorted through the small outfits in the closet with one hand, picking out a soft, warm sleeper to swap for the starched factory-issue onesie. She snuggled the little girl close and was somewhat dismayed to find that she didn't smell like a baby should, all soft powders scents and sharp spit-up smells. Her scent was vaguely plastic, but otherwise nearly indistinguishable from Olivia's own. She didn't know how the cloning process was done, but she didn't suppose it was unusual. She stared at the warm bundle in her arms then, for a long moment - the quivering eyelashes, the furrowing brow, the mouth that suckled at a breast it'd never felt. Olivia thought of the formula in the kitchen, her own arid bosom, and frowned, just a little.

She fed, burped, and bathed the child, being extra gentle around the freshly tattooed barcode on her little ribs. She put the girl in the soft sleeper, and stood in the middle of the nursery, gently swaying with the baby. Her baby.

Ezri seemed to grin, her fat cheeks dimpling, and Olivia laughed, lifting her from the carrier. The nanny smiled as Olivia cuddled and fed the baby, but remained dutifully close by.

Olivia paid extra to have Ezri brought to her at work every day for lunch. It was money well spent; she got to play with Ezri and watch the jealous faces of her coworkers as they walked by. Sometimes they went to the park, or shopping, and sometimes, like today, other mommies in the office would have their children brought in as well for play dates.

Pria and Olivia chatted while the nanny spread a blanket on the floor. They didn't do much more than lay there at only a couple months old, but the women both convinced themselves that the kids enjoyed it.

"Did you see that the receptionist is pregnant?" Pria whispered conspiratorially. Olivia tamped down the spike of jealousy she felt and turned her attention to Ezri.

"No."

"Mm-hmm. Her first one, I think. She's got to be well in to her 40s, though, I'm surprised she's still able." Olivia nodded. "I mean, good for her and all, I guess. But, you know. It's not normal to wait so long. I don't know what I would even do with my self without Aric," she said smiling at the baby boy on the blanket. Olivia forced herself to smile and nodded again.

Finally she managed, "You know, I'm not feeling very well. I wonder if it would be okay with you if we cut this a little short today?"

"Oh absolutely," Pria said, "Actually I'm kind of glad you don't mind. I have a ton of work to catch up on." She got up and put the back of her hand on Olivia's

forehead. “You do feel a little hot.” The nanny swaddled Aric and handed him to her, and with a quick “Feel better!” she was out the door.

Olivia watched the baby squirm for a minute while she checked the calendar in her head. There were only a couple months left on the lease and she’d have to come up with something to explain Ezri’s absence.

Kicking off her pumps she got dropped to her knees on the floor and crawled next to Ezri on the blanket, letting the baby wrap her tiny hand around her index finger. She laid her cheek against the downy hair and inhaled. She smelled of baby powder and no-tears shampoo, but underneath, that plastic factory smell was still there.

“Maybe tomorrow,” she said, “you should keep her home.”

On the last day of her lease Olivia called in sick and sent that nanny home. She sat just out of Ezri’s reach on the carpet, holding a little robodog in her lap.

“Come on sweetie, you’ve got it.”

Ezri, up on all fours, babbled at the dog and rocked back and forth, but didn’t seem to want to take that first move to start actually crawling.

“Come on big girl, you want the puppy?” The toy let out a tiny mechanical bark and Ezri squealed, reached out a hand, and plopped over. Olivia laughed, but it was cut short when the door chimed a visitor.

She sat, still and silent on the floor for a moment, watching Ezri get back onto her hands and knees. When the door chimed again the little dog yipped as she dropped it on the floor. She scooped up Ezri and made her way to the living room to stare at the front door display, which showed a pod outside much like the one that had delivered the girl.

After another minute and another chime she turned to the coffee table and began to dial the holocom she still hadn't replaced.

"Hello, Matirna, Inc. How can I direct -"

"Yes, I would like to renew my lease," she said hurriedly. Perturbed, the hologram of the receptionist frowned at her.

"I'm sorry ma'am, but we don't offer renewable leases."

"But I - " The door chimed again, and Olivia felt the first tears start to prick her eyes as she hugged Ezri closer. The face hovering above her coffee table softened.

" I understand Ma'am. It's quite common that customers become attached to the product, but we don't renew leases on Matirna clones. "

"I only have a six month lease though. Don't you do twelve months?" The receptionist shook her head.

"I'm afraid it's not that simple." Her frown remained sympathetic but her voice and eyes grew hard. "Currently I must ask you to fulfill your contract as stipulated, and return the product to Matirna, Inc., or we will be forced to send a collection team."

"You haven't even – I mean, what will happen to - "

"*And,*" the receptionist broke in loudly, "you will not be allowed to lease again with us in the future," she said with a meaningful look at the baby. Ezri began to squirm and Olivia realized that she'd been holding her too tightly. She let out a breath and relaxed her grip, but couldn't bring herself to look at the girl. The receptionist nodded approvingly, and terminated the call.

Numb, Olivia went to the front door.

"Sign please." The pod droned as it extended another data pad for her thumbprint.

The noise startled Ezri, who started to cry.

Olivia closed her eyes and just listened to her wail for a minute before pressing her thumb to the pad.

“Identity confirmed.” The pod slid open and she laid Ezri inside gently. She kissed her warm forehead, and breathed in the scent of baby lotion and diaper rash ointment, and underneath that just more Ezri. As the pod closed she listened to the baby cry. After it left she went inside and wept too.

Olivia cried and slept, alternately, for two days before the conversation with the receptionist finally hit her. She bashed the buttons on the holocom as fast as she could. It was a different receptionist.

“Hello, Matirna, Inc. How can I direct your call?”

“Can I talk to one of your sales reps?” she said hurriedly. The receptionist was all too happy to comply, and before long she was speaking once again to the man who she’d first worked with.

“Hello, Olivia! I understand that you would like to sign a new lease agreement with us,” he said, his 100-watt smile showing too many teeth.

“Yes. I want a twelve-month lease this time. How soon can you have her back?”  
The sales rep’s smile dimmed.

“Well, here’s the thing ma’am. We at Matirna are awfully glad you are so satisfied with our product, but we generally enforce a waiting period after the end of a lease.” She frowned and he went on, not waiting for her to interrupt him. “We’ve found in trials that it’s not, um...”



“What?” she prompted after a minute.

“Well, we find that customers are often so satisfied with our product that they don’t want to go without it and, in an effort to reduce what we call ‘reliance’ we try to limit customer exposure to the product.” She didn’t know how to respond to that.

“Surely, though, you must have a way to get around the waiting period.” she said. He flashed his wide smile again.

“Well, there is indeed a waiver that we implement for a fee.”

“And how soon would I get her back?”

“We could have another clone there tomorrow.”

“No, the one I had is fine. That’s what I want.”

“Well, if you want a genetically identical clone we could have one there tomorrow, but I might suggest that we switch it up, you could customize it and it would probably only take - ”

“What do you mean identical? I wouldn’t get the actual Ezri back?” She felt like she was shrieking, but she was in reality not talking much louder than a whisper.

“Well, no you see -”

“Where is she? What do you do with them when you take them back?” Her head began to swim and all she could hear was Ezri crying as she was sent away.

“Well, I’m not at liberty to discuss our business model with you ma’am, but suffice it to say that you requested a clone for six months, only, and so beyond that it reverts to Matirna, Inc. property. As I was saying, though, if you -”

The hologram flickered out and went dark as Olivia yanked the cord from the wall.

She cried for another four days in her otherwise silent apartment, Ezri's cries always in the forefront of her mind, before she plugged it back in, paid the exorbitant waiting period waiver fee, and ordered another.

When the baby arrived she recognized her as Ezri immediately, or rather the Ezri she'd gotten a little over six months ago. She took an extended vacation from work for the first several weeks, not wanting to let the new familiar baby out of her sight. When work finally called, though, she realized she was going to have to go back in but she decided that for now, for the next year, half time would have to do. Every time she thought of taking on more work or another client she thought about the other Ezri's chubby face. She couldn't escape it, because every night when she got home it was staring back at her from the arms of the new part-time nanny. Money was tight, and her savings dwindled, but it was worth it to get to both relive her time with Ezri and to truly experience it for the first time.

Once six months had passed things began to feel easier. After six months this was a new Ezri. These were new first steps because she had never gotten to see the last Ezri take them. These were new first words because the last Ezri had only babbled. This was a new laugh, new hair, a new personality in a new chubby body, but enveloping it all was that Ezri smell, the one that Olivia had smelled when she kissed the last Ezri goodbye. For a while, though, things were good. They didn't stay that way.

As Ezri's first birthday loomed closer Olivia began to think more and more about the last Ezri again, to imagine what had happened to her after she'd been taken away. She couldn't imagine what they would possibly do with all the collected clones, but she didn't

think anything could be good. She wanted to believe that she had been sent to an orphanage or adopted out to another family, but she couldn't see how Matirna would profit from that, and so her mind turned to darker things. She pictured her tiny girl, a toddler now, in everything from sweat shops to an organ harvesting plant.

And to picture that Ezri in any number of horrible situations meant to picture this Ezri in the same way, and Olivia knew she couldn't do it again. She checked her pathetically depleted bank account, and bought the tickets.

When they landed it seemed like everything was working to their benefit. They'd arrived just before a massive storm hit and so all the flights in were being re-directed. Olivia made the most of the head start she had and booked a hotel using real paper money, much to the confusion of the poor kid working the night desk.

Ezri's birthday was still three days away, but realizing they might not get another easy night, Olivia ordered a cake through room service. She settled Ezri in her lap and sang to her while the toddler clapped and babbled, but much to her surprise Ezri didn't want any of the cake.

"No." She said grumpily, in her tiny voice, and not wanting her to throw a fit, Olivia didn't push it.

She tried to offer her some of the snacks stashed in the diaper bag, some crackers from the mini-bar, even some water, but Ezri shook her head at each proffered item.

"What's wrong, honey?"

"Tummy," Ezri answered in her small voice with a pout.

"Do you not feel good?" Olivia pressed her back of her hand to the girl's forehead

and rather than hot found it alarmingly cold. “Okay...uh. Okay.” Olivia felt a mild sense of panic. Neither this Ezri, nor the last one, had ever even had the sniffles. She wasn’t entirely sure what to do, but it seemed that warming her up was the first step. She bundled the girl in the blankets from the bed and held her close, but after about thirty minutes or so it didn’t seem to be making any difference. When Ezri started shivering Olivia decided to try and run her a warm bath.

Ezri’s limbs relaxed for a few minutes, but before long she was shivering again and her tiny fingers and toes were a pale bluish color. Olivia didn’t want to leave her in the bath unattended but the holocom was in the other room and, not wanting to be tracked, she didn’t bring any kind of mobile with her.

She had to risk it.

She raced out to the bedroom and discovered that the holocom was even older than hers, and took what seemed like forever to power on. Desperate, she mashed buttons until it started reading her input, and she dialed 911. The line kept ringing and ringing, but there was no answer.

“Mama,” Ezri called from the bathroom.

“I’m here baby, I’ll be right there,” she called, trying to keep the panic from her voice. “Come on, pick up. Pick up.” Finally there was a flash, but instead of talking to a person Olivia was faced with a message explaining there was a high call volume due to the storm.

“Son of a bitch.”

“Mama...”

“Sorry, honey, it will be just another minute.” The holocom flashed again and a

man's tired face greeted her.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"My daughter, she's so cold. I can't get her to warm up and I think, I think she's really sick," She said in a rush. Ezri called again from the bathroom, and she tried to reassure her. "Shh, honey, mama is getting you some help."

She gave their names, and the address of the motel, while Ezri cried out for her, weakly.

"Okay, ma'am, how old is your daughter?"

"Almost a year."

"Okay, and does she have any allergies?"

Olivia felt like she couldn't organize her thoughts. "Allergies? I, mean, not that I know of. But I'm allergic to penicillin, so what do I need to do if she's sick? Do you think it's allergies? Is there something else I can give her?"

"Allergies aren't necessarily genetic ma'am, so I'm sure if it comes to that she'll be fine."

"Mama..."

"Well she's..." Olivia suddenly remembered the non-disclosure agreement. It wasn't what stopped her from sharing that Ezri was a clone though, it was that she didn't know if they would still help her if they found out. "Can you tell me how long until someone gets here?"

"I'm working on rerouting an ambulance to you right now ma'am."

"Okay, because I don't think the bath is doing her any good."

"Alright ma'am, I'm going to put you on hold for a minute while I talk with the

crew I'm sending your way. Alright?

“Yeah. Alright.”

The hologram went dark and silent as Olivia paced back and forth. The silence stretched for minutes that felt like hours. When the operator came back on the line it startled her.

“Ma'am, I'm sorry, I just need to verify something. You said she's in the bath?”

“Yeah, a warm bath.”

“Have you checked on her? I don't hear her.”

Olivia's body went rigid and for a second she was afraid to go look, afraid of seeing her little girl dead in the tub from hypothermia, or worse drowned because she'd left her there. Then she was running as fast as she could, but the door to the bathroom felt miles away and it seemed like she wasn't at all.

When she finally rounded the corner she didn't see what she'd expected.

Ezri was gone, but the tub was far from empty. She made it a few steps closer to the tub before she dropped to her knees and vomited up the birthday cake her daughter hadn't eaten.

Olivia sat on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, staring at nothing. The trip back, after she'd been released, after she'd been arrested, after the ambulance had finally arrived, had been agonizing. But the worst of it had been the smell, Ezri's smell emanating from that horrendous goop in the tub.

Matirna, Inc. had paid for her trip home, of course. They'd paid her bail, and the legal fees, and eventually paid to make it all just go away. A rep from the company drove

her home from the air port, had her give her prints on several documents, and now sat next to her, eyes searching, waiting for some sign that Olivia had heard her. Finally she found her voice.

“So they all do that?”

Relieved, the rep nodded. “Yes, they’re designed to do that. I mean, if you pay for a 6 month lease then the clone you receive is viable for 6 months. Because of the rapid growth methods we use to deliver our product in a timely manner,” Olivia turned to glare at the woman. Undeterred she went on, “the organisms aren’t entirely stable. It’s an unfortunate side-effect, but one we’ve been working on.” Olivia wondered if that was supposed to comfort her.

“Anyway,” the rep went on. “ Since you, of course, paid for a twelve month lease this should never have happened so soon. There should have been plenty of time for us to pick it up before the degeneration. Again, we at Matirna, Inc. offer our deepest apologies. You were never meant to see that, and I know it has had to be utterly traumatic for you.” Olivia just nodded. She thought traumatic was both the right word, and an inadequate one. “Well. There is one last matter. While, because of this unfortunate incident, we will gladly cover all the legal fees, we will not be able to refund your purchase price.”

Although money was the last thing on her mind, Olivia couldn’t help but ask. “Why?”

“Well you contacted 911. You violated the agreement by including a government agency in a situation where you should have called customer service. Normally, you would also be added to a blacklist, forbidden from being able to work with the company in the future as well. But we understand it was a distressing situation, which forced you to

act rashly. So we are willing to overlook it. Mostly.”

Olivia looked her in the eyes for any sense of remorse, but finding none just nodded. “Very kind of you.”

“Of course,” the rep said with a smile. “Well. If you are all settled in I need to be getting back to the office.”

Olivia didn’t follow her to the door. She sat on the couch, unmoving, trying to process. Failing.

She didn’t go back in to work that week, or the next. She instead spent time carefully packing away all of Ezri’s toys and clothes. She couldn’t bear for them to be spread all over the apartment. Every time she looked at them she remembered Ezri’s face, but every time she smelled them she thought of the stuff in the hotel tub.

After she’d finally gotten everything stashed in what was once Ezri’s room, she made herself go back to work. It wasn’t that she knew she needed to get out of the house so much as she was broke.

When she came home after her fourth day back she found she had a message on the holocom. She hit play as she went about taking off her work clothes, and could tell right away that it was just someone trying to sell something.

“Greetings valued customer! We here at Matirna, Inc. are pleased to announce that we now offer two year leases! Perfect for trial parenting runs, short term commitments....” Bile rose in the back of Olivia’s throat, and she started to move around the back of the couch toward the coffee table. As she reached to delete the message, though, she paused. “...won’t be the only one of your childless friends. We are also



happy to say that as a one of our most valued customers you qualify for a Matirna line of credit and payment plan! We look forward to doing business with you again soon.”

She sat down hard on the edge of the couch and, after a moment, hit repeat.

## SACRED SPACES

Max could only stare at the older woman on the bench next to her while she tried to figure out how to respond. She obviously wasn't getting anywhere with the woman; she wasn't really even sure why she was still talking to her. She was older than Max, though it was impossible to tell exactly how much. Max wondered if perhaps she had dementia, but she seemed fairly lucid. After a moment she decided maybe being direct was best.

"Are you insane?" She asked, half-jokingly. The woman, Diásthma she'd said her name was, laughed and shook her head gently.

"No, Maxine, I assure you I am not." Her accent was strange and lilting, and the words seemed to resonate in her mouth as she spoke. It wasn't unpleasant, but made Max's ears hum a bit when she talked.

"Just Max," she said, "But all of that stuff is just myth. It's not real." Diásthma turned her impossibly light eyes away from the playground to stare at Max, waiting for her to say more. "You can't expect me to believe you're a goddess. I mean, *you* don't really believe that do you?"

The smile disappeared from Diásthma's face, but the fine wrinkles at the corners of her eyes belied her amusement. "It is real. *I* am real. But you are focusing on the wrong thing. Answer the question."

Max looked across the park toward the playground. It seemed no one else noticed the two of them sitting on the bench, and she was disheartened to see there weren't any police in sight. The woman didn't seem dangerous, but the way her ageless eyes peered

into Max's own made her uneasy.

“But I've never even heard of you. If it's all real shouldn't you be, I don't know, on Mt. Olympus with Zeus or something?”

She smiled, as she said it, but when Diásthma laughed again, this time a harsh noise, Max got the distinct impression she'd said something wrong. The silence between them stretched for a few minutes before Diásthma spoke, all trace of mirth gone from her voice.

“Olympus is a place for peacocks and petty children. The truth of me is very different, and not in your stories or books. My place is here.” Max opened her mouth to reply, but Diásthma held up a hand, forestalling argument. “Enough. We have been talking in circles about what I am and what I am not, and I hate to be the one to tell you this Maxine, but what you want to be true and what is true are not always the same. I need an answer.”

Max didn't know what the harm could be in humoring her. She shrugged. “Then sure, why not?”

To her surprise Diásthma frowned. “Don't do that. Don't just flippantly decide the rest of your life. Really think about it, Maxine.”

“Max,” she corrected absently as Diásthma turned her body more fully toward her, closing the distance between them ever so slightly.

“Look at them.” Diásthma urged, nodding her head toward the playground. Max glanced at the children climbing on the equipment, the parents letting short legs outpace their own as they raced around the open areas. Neither woman said anything for several minutes.

“Do you want that?” Diásthma asked softly. At the sound of more left unsaid Max tore her gaze away from the sleeping form in a stroller to look at the woman who claimed to be a goddess. Diásthma leaned forward, uncomfortably close, “Do you want children?” she asked, voice almost a whisper.

“Yes.” Max said finally.

Diásthma dropped her gaze and pulled away from Max. “That’s what I was afraid of.” She slumped on the park bench, crossing her arms. She reminded Max suddenly very much of a sullen teenager, making her age even harder to pin down.

She had to ask. She almost couldn’t help it. “Why?”

Diásthma looked up from under her frowning silver brows for a moment, studying her face before sitting up again. “Because Maxine, you are something rare in this world. You could be or do so many things. But if you become a mother...” She shook her head and looked out over the park. “For many women motherhood is the best of all possible futures, but for you,” she trailed off, staring at something Max couldn’t see. “I don’t suppose there’s anything I could say to change your mind, is there?”

Max felt both somehow offended and troubled. “No. I mean, there’s nothing to say that I can’t do or be somebody if I have a kid,” she said hotly. “Tons of women do. My mom had me, and a very successful career - ” she shut her mouth abruptly, angry that she felt the need to defend herself or her mother to this clearly disturbed individual. Diásthma didn’t let it rest, though.

“Yes, but just think what she could have done if she hadn’t had children.”

Diásthma said casually.

Max had had enough.

“Okay, you know what?” she started hotly, before checking herself at the confused look on Diásthma’s face. “No, never mind. I don’t know why I’m even talking to you. Have a good night.” With that she grabbed her things and stood to leave.

She only made it a few steps on the way back to her car through the lengthening shadows before the urge to check over her shoulder hit her, but Diásthma was nowhere to be seen.

By the time she reached the parking lot she felt calmer, and by the time she got home she was able to laugh about it. By the time she went to bed she’d put the whole ordeal out of her head. She didn’t forget, though, not really, and that night she dreamed of impossibly light colored eyes.

A few days later she found herself reading at one of the bistro tables outside the coffee shop when a strange woman sat herself at the chair across from her without being invited.

“Beautiful day out,” the woman said, eyes closed and face turned to the sun.

“Can I help you?” asked Max, trying to keep the irritation from her voice while glancing meaningfully around at all the empty tables.

“Actually,” the woman said smiled, bringing her face around to look at Max, “I’m here to help you.” Impossibly light eyes stared out at her from an unfamiliar face and Max’s blood ran cold. “We did not leave it as I would wish last time we spoke, Maxine.”

“Max,” she corrected out of habit, and because she didn’t know what else to do.

The body was different. Even the voice was different, but she knew, without a doubt, that this was the woman she’d spoken to in the park.

“You keep saying that,” said Diásthma in her strange lilting accent. “But it’s a

shame to shorten such a strong name. Do you know what it means? It means ‘greatest.’” She raised one new dark eyebrow meaningfully. “And you could be, Maxine. That’s why I’m here.”

“What?” Max replied dumbly after an awkward silence.

“I was trying to explain last time before you left-” She stopped abruptly. “I’m ... sorry, by the way. For what I said about your mother. I suppose I can see how that might seem rude. But you must understand...” She trailed off as Max simply stared at her. She cleared her throat delicately. “Let me begin again.

“I have sought you out, Maxine. I have looked for you and for women like you for longer than you can fathom. You spoke as if you know something of my family.” She waited for Max to nod before she asked, “And what do you know of us? I mean, what do you know of what we do, who we are?”

Still shaken, Max combed through half-remembered lessons from world history class before answering. “Um, Aphrodite was the goddess of love, Apollo was the god of the sun, things like that. Zeus was the, uh,” She faltered, remembering all the ways Zeus meddled in the lives of women, and suddenly didn’t want to look at the woman, this different but same woman, across from her. *Diásthma* filled the silence and as she spoke the air against Max’s skin began to vibrate, to press in on her uncomfortably.

“It is as you say. We each have a realm, something we are inexorably tied to. And do you know what I do Maxine? Do you know the part of me that is bound up in your world?” Max shook her head. She was suddenly very cold despite the warm afternoon sunshine. “I am the goddess of space, of emptiness, and through that emptiness I am the goddess of infinite possibility and endless opportunity. Do you know what that means

Maxine?” Max shook her head. “Look at me Maxine.” Maxine shut her eyes for a few heartbeats.

She didn’t know if she believed this woman was a goddess, but she knew she was something altogether *other*. She could feel the pressure of it in her ears, smell the ozone as the power of her words charged the air around them. When she opened her eyes and looked up she was almost shocked to see that Diásthma looked exactly as she had before – an unassuming woman at a coffee shop, sitting in the sun.

“It means, Maxine, that I can see all the things that might happen. The future, after all, is its own kind of emptiness, and thus my domain. And I can see, for you, all the women you might become.” She reached across the table as though to touch Max’s arm, but dropped her hand when Max flinched. “Don’t be frightened, Maxine.” Diásthma studied her face for a moment. “Come. Let us walk a while. It will help.”

Diásthma got up and started to glide slowly down the block. She didn’t look back, but after a moment Max stood shakily and followed.

They walked in silence for a few moments, Diásthma calmly taking in the sights, Max staring at her shoes, trying to fathom the being next to her.

“I can sense you have questions.” Diásthma said as they turned a corner. “Please, ask them.”

“Have I gone insane?” Max blurted. Diásthma looked over at her with wry amusement.

“Humans. You always assume it is either you or I that have lost our mind. No, you are quite lucid.” She smiled over at Max, “But a hallucination would probably be the first to reassure you that everything was fine, so I may not be the one to ask.”

Max barked out a short laugh, some of the tension slipping from her. “Fair point.”

“That is not your real question. What do you really want to know?”

“Well, I...” Max swallowed to relieve the sudden dryness in her throat. “What do you want from me?” Diásthma nodded at the question.

“I don’t want anything from you, Maxine. I want to give you something. To do something for you.” She looked askance at Max. “I don’t think you’ll like it though.”

“What is it?”

“This would be easier if you didn’t want children.”

Her steps faltered, and Max had to rush a few steps to catch up. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve found many women through the years like you, Maxine. Women who could do anything if given the freedom to do so.” Diásthma’s steps slowed and Max kept pace. “Many of them welcome me when I come to them, they beg me to give them what I’m offering you. But many more don’t see it for the blessing that it is.” She cleared her throat, a gesture that struck Max as peculiarly ordinary.

“What exactly is it that you’re proposing Diásthma?”

The goddess stopped walking abruptly and turned to Max, a determined set to her jaw. “I am offering you the chance to live a child-free life, Maxine. I am offering you infertility.”

Max could only stare at her for a minute, shocked.

“What do you mean you’re *offering* it to me? Who would want that?” She found herself backing away from Diásthma, picturing the small chubby faces in the park, tiny shoes, and delicate hands. Diásthma watched her, eyebrows creased in pity, and Max



suddenly felt very exposed.

“I don’t want that. Thank, you, but no. No I – I want to remain as I am.” She stepped back again to trip over the bistro chair they’d circled back round to.

Diásthma caught her arm to steady her, but Max jerked away. Diásthma’s face shifted from pity to annoyance.

“Calm yourself Maxine. I’m offering this to you because I hope that you’ll be willing to accept it for what it is – a chance to change everything.”

“But, I want to be a mother.” Max said. It sounded pitiful even to her, and woefully inadequate for expressing what she felt.

“I know, child. But it’s not meant to be.”

“It is meant to be! If it wasn’t going to happen you wouldn’t want to change it.” She snapped. She looked around, but no one besides Diásthma seemed to notice her outburst.

Diásthma frowned and gestured toward the tables. “Sit. Let me try and explain this in a way you can understand.” Max sat, more because her legs felt like rubber than anything else.

Diásthma pulled up a chair and leaned her elbows on the table.

“Listen to me, Maxine. The first time I gave someone this gift was thousands of years ago.”

“That’s nice, and all, but I really don’t care. I don’t want it.” Max snapped.

“Careful girl,” Diásthma said, voice low. “The space in your lungs is mine as much as the space in your belly, and it’s nothing for me to make you be quiet.” She stared hard at Max, light eyes hard, until she nodded.

“Now. This girl she wanted to play music. But she was to be married off, yoked to a life she did not want, the promise of her unwritten future filled with nothing but wailing babes and a rutting husband, all other possibilities stifled if she was forced to follow the path set out for her. I saw in this young woman the face of my sister Gaea, heaving and in pain nearly all the time she wasn’t smothered by Uranus, and I knew what needed to happen.

“I placed my hand on the girl’s belly and created a permanent space in her womb, an emptiness from which nothing but possibility and endless opportunity would grow, through which the girl might go forth and do nearly anything she pleased as all of her life would be her own again.” Diásthma sat up straight, a please smile on her face, as though everything should be clear now. “Do you understand Maxine?”

Max bit her lip and nodded.

“What do you wish to say? Speak.”

Max sighed. “I understand why you did it, but Diásthma, I am not that girl. I *want* children. I want a husband and a family.”

Diásthma nodded, clearly disappointed that Max didn’t find her deed as compelling as she’d hoped. “So you do. But let me finish. I sought out other women and offered them my blessing. I found many who gladly accepted my touch, and many who refused me. For the most part, I don’t force any woman to accept my gift.”

“For the most part?” Max asked softly. Diásthma had the decency to avert her gaze, and tears began to prick the back of Max’s eyes.

“For centuries I have wandered the earth, and through the years I have found a handful of women who might not only change their own lives, but that of those around

them, perhaps even the whole world, should they remain childfree.” She lifted her head, again looking Max in the eye. “The *world* Maxine.” The two held eye contact for a few heartbeats before Max looked away.

Diásthma sighed and continued, “Many of these women held such love in their hearts for their unborn children that it filled all the spaces in their lives before they’d really even begun. What was best for these women and what they desperately wanted were two different things.” Max closed her eyes at Diásthma’s pleading tone as she went on. “I knew that if these women had children their lives would be empty in a new and terrible way. Where there should be space for growth and change, for potential and possibility, there would be only void, only a lack. These women, it’s true, I did not give a choice.” She took a shuddering breath before adding softly, “Which is why I am here, Maxine.”

The tears flowed freely from between Max’s tightly closed lids. She waited for what would come next, but Diásthma was silent for such a long while that Max was almost convinced that she had left. She finally risked a look at the deity to find, much to her surprise, Diásthma crying silently.

“I do not wish to force this on you, girl.” She wiped a tear away delicately. “I have come to you, as all the women before, because in your life I see a blessed absence, an emptiness that lends itself only to possibility and hope. And I see that space in your life narrowing to a single focus, children, and the glowing potential futures you would have fading. I come to you to offer an empty womb, and through it a chance to explore the vast unwritten prospects before you.”

She stood and walked around the small bistro table to kneel on the cement in front

of Max, taking her hands. Max resisted the urge to pull away when Diásthma's power danced up her arms. "I take no delight in hurting you, Maxine. But I do delight in the paths open for you if I do this." She stood, and pulled Max to her feet. "Let me show you. Let me try to convince you to let me give this to you, rather than do it to you."

Max stared into Diásthma's pale eyes, nodded, and together they explored the infinite.

Max saw through Diásthma's eyes the ways in which she might live, the very plausible chance that she would shape the women around her into strong and capable people. She saw the chance that she would serve as the president, that she would marry a visiting dignitary, that she would invent everything from engines for space travel to self-repairing roofs. Max saw the fame she might have, the things she might learn, the ways she might grow and inspire others. And, too, she saw the ways she might lead a simple life as a shop clerk, how she might marry an accountant, how she might never marry and die penniless, or how she may adopt foster children in need. She saw herself as a priestess, a beggar, a victim, a conqueror, and more. So much more. And when Diásthma was done showing her what endless possibilities she held in the unfilled space of her future, she found herself sobbing in the arms of a deity in front of a café.

When she had composed herself she turned to the goddess and asked, "How do you know that I'll make the right choices? That I'll be a great woman? What's to keep me from ending up ..." she burst out crying again before she could get it out.

"Hush, girl. Sit." Diásthma guided her to the chairs once again. "Shh. Just breathe." She stroked Max's back and breathed deeply herself until the crying eased. "I will be honest with you Maxine. I do not know that you *will* make the right choices. I

know only that you are already a great woman, and you must have space to grow, room to breathe, and emptiness to fill if you are ever to become more.”

Max wiped her face with her sleeve and pressed gently at her swollen eyes.

“What would you have me do, Diásthma?” she asked. “I understand what you’re saying, but...” her voice broke, “I want to have kids. I didn’t even know, before this, how badly I wanted them.”

“Before you knew you could not have them, you mean?” Diásthma asked gently, and Max nodded. “I’m sorry for that,” Diásthma said, “But I needed to know, I needed to make you understand why this is happening to you.”

The women sat quietly for a few minutes, each thinking about Max’s unborn children. Finally, Diásthma broke the silence.

“Let me give you this gift, Maxine. I don’t pretend that it will be easy for you, but I – I wish only the best for you. I mean this not as a curse, but as a blessing.”

Max heard the power and the truth of Diásthma’s words reverberate through her soul, but it took everything she had just to nod, to close her eyes and hold still as Diásthma placed her hand upon her belly and made her barren.

“There, child. Through this emptiness in your womb I give you space in your life now for you, the room you need to grow, for you to use as you wish.” Diásthma crouched in front of Max, lifting her chin to look at her one last time with those impossibly light eyes. “I’m sorry, Max. But I know someday you’ll see that I do this because I love you.”

Max closed her eyes as tears rolled freely once more down her cheeks. Diásthma stood over her for a moment longer before kissing the top of her bent head.

Then she was gone.

Alone, Max took stock of what had happened. It didn't hurt, at least not physically. Max knew, though, that she was no longer exactly the same person, and neither was she entirely different. This new somewhere-in-between Max, though, was going to be okay.

## CAST OFF

She hadn't been looking for a sign, but she welcomed it when it appeared. It hadn't been the way her lover touched her softly with rough hands, it hadn't been his stability, his commitment, the years they had spent together. It came as a box full of tangled potential, yarn in soft colors delivered, overnight, to her door. Her grandmother left it to her to knit a baby blanket for the great-grandchild she would never meet, and as she sat on the stoop in the muggy September air, her fingers picking at and separating strings of baby's-breath-white and pinched-cheek-pink, she recalled her grandma telling her that if she were ever to knit a baby blanket, by the time she was done, she would surely have a baby to wrap with it.

She didn't know how her lover would feel about it, so she waited a few weeks to talk to him about it, until the days grew shorter and the shadows longer, when the temperature dropped enough to make skin-on-skin bearable again, when she could let down her hair and take him to her bed.

As the word "baby" left her lips he froze, his calloused hands on her smooth thighs as she sat straddling his hips clothed in nothing but a sheet of auburn waves. They stayed that way, staring at one another, until he gave her a sheepish smile and she felt her limbs relax. She leaned forward to kiss him and his smile turned wolfish. He made a sound, low and hungry, as he tangled his fingers in her long hair and grazed his teeth over the skin of her neck. His thick fingers moved to her waist and he moved against and inside of her, eager to get started, as the first molten gold leaves of autumn dripped past the window.

She started on the blanket the next day, her fingers ungainly at first in a half-remembered rhythm from lessons when she was a girl. Cast on, and then through, over, back through, off. Through, over, back through, off. She worked on it in her spare time at first, and on some evenings he helped, in his way, splayed fingers tangled in yarn as she turned one skein after another into neat balls while they listened to old CDs and debated names. They enjoyed these evenings, working on the blanket, and then working on the baby it would swaddle.

The blanket came along slowly, her progress measured in fractions of inches, and despite her grandmother's wisdom, she worried that if she got pregnant too quickly she wouldn't make any real headway in time. So she began to take it with her, to work on it whenever she had a spare moment; on the bus, in waiting rooms, each evening in bed before she went to sleep she knitted.

Steadily, stitch-by-stitch, the blanket grew, and with it the surety that when it was finished she would be a mother.

When several months had passed she thought it was nearly big enough, but her belly remained empty, and so she knitted still. Her lover helped still, too, in his way – running to the store for more yarn, helping her count stitches to keep the pattern tight.

It began to take up space around her wherever she went, pooled on the floor, wrapped around her, draped over the furniture, building a soft pastel barrier wherever she went between her and the rest of the world. The mass of fibers began to grow heavy and burdensome, and her arms would tremble so badly trying to carry it all that she began to spool it around herself, tangling up her limbs and hair. The only time she set her needles down and climbed from her nest of blanket was when she tumbled into the waiting circle



of her lover's arms, already hot and itchy from the great swath of yarn. Her arms trembled and her fingers moved in a small rhythmic dance even after she'd come to bed, stopping only when she clutched him or the sheets.

One night when it was time for bed she set the knitting down only to find that she had knit part of her long hair into the weave. It pulled on her scalp and bent her head at a strange angle. She tried to pull it out, but her weary limbs couldn't separate the strands. Her lover reached over her, pressing her smaller frame into the bed with his own, and grabbed the blanket, spreading it over them both. When the pressure eased, she lifted her head to look at the shroud spread across their bodies, the bed, down onto the floor, and she realized just how big the blanket had gotten. Much, much too large. Under cover of yarn, hair, and darkness she cried.

In the morning her lover helped her untangle her tresses, pulling the sky-blue tail of yarn to undo several rows of stitching. It wasn't long, however, before she'd accidentally woven more of her hair through the ever-expanding blanket, and this time she didn't think about undoing the stitches. That night when she came to bed her lover realized what had happened as she lay balanced on the edge of the mattress, and refused to come closer. He began to reach over her again, but she pushed him away, and refused to let him undo any more. That night they each felt the space between them keenly, and despite the growing blanket the room was chilly.

In the morning she picked up her needles again, and vowed not to put them down until she had a baby. The blanket became more entangled with her hair, took up more and more room, but she continued furiously until eventually it created a barrier of yarn

and hair between them, at all times, both day and night. It swelled until it pushed him out of the bed, eventually out of the room, and finally out of the house.

Even as he was forced out, she found that she could not escape. She was set adrift in fluff, alone in a maze of her own making, her neck bent at an awkward angle, and her fingers growing stiff and gnarled as the yarn piled over and under the bed, clinging to the corners of the rooms like cobwebs, filling the house nearly to bursting. When she tried to shift too much the blanket shocked her, and soon hair and limbs alike were ensnared, cocooning her, suspending her in the nest she'd inadvertently made.

Her lover tried, repeatedly, to get through even as she joined another row. He called to her, and offered her anything he could think of for her to stop. Her lover pried open windows and pulled armfuls of softness out into the night, hoping to make room inside for himself, but it seemed whatever good he did, was undone just as fast.

She could feel everything shift as he worked, like vibrations in a web. She heard his muffled calls from outside the house, heard him beg her to stop knitting, to cut herself free and to come out to him. She tried to ignore him.

But as he tugged on the blanket he tugged at her, and though she didn't think she could abandon her work, she knew she couldn't let him leave either. She tried to make it to the door, a window, to go to him. She prized her contorted fingers off of the needles, and grabbed handfuls of blanket, trying to struggle out of the mass, but each handful she pulled on yanked her hair. She tried to untangle her legs to push, but it seemed impossible to find purchase with her feet on the silken fibers. For hours she struggled, and for hours he stayed outside and called to her.

When she was so close to the door she could feel the fresh air leaking through the weave she called back to him, and he came at once to the spot where he heard her voice. He dug his hands into the pastel mass, found her arms and tried to pull her to him.

Her head wrenched backwards as he hauled on her hands. Her hair, so enmeshed with the blanket now, held her neck bent painfully. She screamed as he tried to wrest more of the knitting out of the way and her twisted fingers clawed his arms as they struggled for and against each other.

In the depths of the house the blanket shifted, rubbing as it was tugged and pushed from elsewhere. Whole coils of purl stitch blanket chafed against one another, mounds of yarn rotated in place on the carpet, and friction started to build. Heat traveled down and up the delicate lines, and throughout the house thousands of small sparks flew, crashing into the walls, into one another, until eventually they found her skin.

She jerked as the first tiny jolts struck her. She turned wide eyes on her lover, but she had no time to tell him what was happening before she felt a thousand tiny shocks, each harmless in its own right, but something else entirely taken together.

He didn't know what was happening as she jerked in her fibrous casing, but he reached out to her anyway, grabbed her twitching hands. His touch grounded her, and when she could focus again she saw in his eyes that he'd had enough even before he let her hands fall and stepped away

She could only stare at him. She had no words to fix things, and so she retreated back into the folds.

Her lover stared at the place she had been, and though he didn't leave, he didn't reach in again.

She pulled herself deeper inside where sparks flitted between the rows, some of them starting to catch, and the acrid smell of singed hair and smoldering yarn greeted her. Working quickly, she grabbed fingerfulls of hair, and tore at them with her teeth. With the first cuts she could feel the pain in her neck change from a constant strain to something sharp, and bearable. Heat started to build around her and it became more difficult to breath. Panicking she started to try and break it with her hands, to pull it out strands at a time, anything to get free.

She clawed her way back out just as the weave closest to her ignited. She emerged gasping for air, hair strangely shorn and scalp bleeding, and he rushed to help pull her out as the blanket began to truly blaze. He gathered her weary frame to him and carried her away from the overflowing house as smoke began to heave from the windows and the roof screeched and buckled.

When they were far enough away he set her down, her feet firmly on the ground for the first time in a long time, and as first the fingers of the cool south wind, and then of the warm, steady man beside her ran through her newly shorn locks, she watched it burn and tried to adjust to the pain of her new freedom.

I, Rosalie Krenger, hereby submit this thesis/report to Emporia State University as partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree. I agree that the Library of the University may make it available to use in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type. I further agree that quoting, photocopying, digitizing or other reproduction of this document is allowed for private study, scholarship (including teaching) and research purposes of a nonprofit nature. No copying which involves potential financial gain will be allowed without written permission of the author. I also agree to permit the Graduate School at Emporia State University to digitize and place this thesis in the ESU institutional repository.

---

Signature of Author

---

Date

Salted Earth: An Original Fiction Manuscript  
and Ecofeminist Analysis of the Monstrous  
Childless Woman Trope

---

Title of Thesis

---

Signature of Graduate School Staff

---

Date Received