

Faulty Mothering

Also by Elaine Randell

Songs of Hesperus
Telegrams from the Midnight Country
Untitled
Seven Poems
A Taper to the Outward Roome
Early in My Life
Long Hair for Birds
This, Our Frailty
Larger Breath of All Things
Hard to Place
Songs for the Sleepless
Beyond All Other: Poems 1970–1986
Prospect into Breath
Gut Reaction
Selected Poems 1970–2005

Faulty Mothering

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*For my three daughters
Phoebe, Beatrice and Naomi*

FAULTY MOTHERING

FAULTY MOTHERING

1991–1996

“We think back through our mothers if we are women.”
Virginia Woolf

I

Slip shod
worn through all my empty threats
smarty packets gold stars
left with maternal comfort exhaustion
forgiveness.

Her eye saw the back of the Starrite sandal
as he turned the corner towards the pond
Don't play near the water, she said
I'm not, he shouted. Her arms pit high in
suds, legs aching. I only put my foot in
he said displaying the black silt up to his groin.
The baby woke red faced howling then stopped
suddenly. Even children who have experienced bad parenting
with no other relationships do not necessarily abuse all their
children . . .

Rachel ran in.

Is lunch ready, I'm starving.

She picked him up onto the edge of the wooden draining
board and soaked his foot in the sink,
she ran to the baby. Rachel shut up, she said and
ran past her.

II

After she was born
 they let me hold her
her soft head had slipped
from between my legs.
 Such promise.

The septicaemia put me
into the isolation ward.
I never saw her for 12 days
my milk dried
my heart stopped.
It was never the same again.

I lost what we had
 she's a stranger
 a no-one.
Outside the men were
shovelling grit into the road.
In life there is simply
no time to touch
only brush by in passing.

III

My history as a child
was torn
wanting to please
be tidy
honest faithful
and yet missing
a link a passport to the adult
world
I was muzzled callipered
orphaned.

IV

I am tired of your trousers and shoes
she said
they are full of you.

When the twins were born
he never said 'I love you' he just said
'great' and stood up when he'd seen their
heads in the tiny plastic cots.

He never brought flowers like the other
fathers, she tried not to be hurt. She
knew he did it on purpose.

At night she would cry herself to sleep
between feeding the babies. One would
wake then the other then the other then
the other. Her breasts felt like sore bricks.

You ought to get some rest he told her.

Her friends made her go out alone but
at feeding time her milk came in and

ran down the sides of her body and formed in droplets round
her feet.

When his family came they would love
playing with the twins, bouncing them high
and making them laugh "You are a lucky
girl," his mother said.

At dawn when the children slept she read,

"When people manage to get in touch with their own pain,
they no longer want to take it out on others".

V

There is moment inside of him that he can recall
—a crying out, arms flaying. The sides of the cot
are hard, the mattress wet, he cries out and then stops.

Damp garden clay late blue flowers seed heads
cut down the new buds breaking through. The nights are drawing
in over our head my arms are bent double with effort. Your socks
have lost their colour in the wash.

Blackened ideas, a dream of soaring
you are there and I have lost my legs. I can never
fail to look out for you. The back of your
jumper never ceases to lift me.

The resolution to be young again to not worry
so often they seem to fade away
her tiny hand, unblemished heart. “Fish do have eyes
don’t they Mummy?” she asked.

He turned on his Lotus shoe heel in the kitchen on the
Vinolay and slammed the door
“Where’s Daddy going?” asked Michael.
It was the last time he ever mentioned him.

The green edge of winter has opened and into the meadow the
yellow basins of Buttercup and Vetch tangle around
the gate post.

VI

“I never asked them for much just that they kept the wood basket topped with kindling. Then I could do the washing on the boiler see. I had three sons and a husband that only saw as far as his fishing line. On the 10th November I went round the house picking up the dirty washing, went to the Rayburn—no kindling. They only have to do one thing, I thought, get kindling and they can’t even do that for me.

I was faced with a mud ridden kitchen, a mound of washing no hot water and no kindling. I found my purse put on my coat and left. I walked up to the village and took a bus, got off and sat down outside the church, took the bus back again and waited till after dark and then when I could think of nothing else to do I went home. The kitchen was all lit up, he was making the cheese on toast, they looked up when I came in. Then I saw the washing still there, the fire still out, the basket empty. No kindling. ‘Where you been Mum?’ ‘I’ve been to the pictures’ I said. ‘Good film was it?’ he asked.”