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Mary Kennan Herbert

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Three Poems

By Mary Kennan Herbert¹

Trying To Make Sense of Motherhood

Everything has been done right.
Baby bed, rocking chair, little cabinet.

Open the wee door.
See tiny hangers, sweet dresses, delicate sweaters.

On top of the cabinet, a little lamp with merry-go-round figures.
Across the room, a changing table with diapers and small blankets

waiting just for a newborn girl.
In the center of the room, that rocking chair waits.

It was bought long before her arrival but, now at last, perfectly timed.
In the bed, brand-new bumper guards with a duckling print,

pretty sheets with animals and flowers, and a little pillow just for show.
Welcome, new baby.

I did it right, and bought the right things,
even the cute carousel lamp to light my way. I will try to be a good
mother, really.

But the nights seem heavy, heavier than the folded sheets
in neat little stacks in that miniature cabinet guarded by adorable angels.

I admire the robin that sings at 4 AM,
as I sit in the rocker, cradling a new baby.

Marveling at the bird who arises before dawn, telling of its love and
territory
even before morning arrives, the sun

on time as usual, with little patience for my morose bleats.
I want to tell the world I too am reliable and just,

¹ Originally from St. Louis, Missouri, Mary Kennan Herbert now teaches literature and writing courses at Long Island University in Brooklyn, NY. Her poems have appeared in many publications in over 20 different countries. Six anthologies of her poems have been published by Ginninderra Press in Australia

but I too want to be received and rocked. Justice, blind,
hums a tune. Rock-a-bye, baby. The jury tiptoes out.

Weekend In The Woods

Her son and daughter, old enough to vote, sprawl
on couches in the cabin. Country flies buzz by.

Progeny sleep in the appropriately soporific heat
of August. Hazy. Sophomoric behavior stirs, peaks.

They are far from a favored beach. Trees close in.
Her spouse prefers the woods, not coves, not sand.

On arrival he pulls weeds with startling pleasure.
Clumps of dirt cling to naked roots. Not hers, whose?

"Fill the bird feeder," he commands. His moccasins
are planted in fresh raked earth. Plans mushroom.

"What's with the kids?" he asks. "They get here,
they nap." Sleep knits up the raveled sleeve of care-

a coy, Shakespearean defense. Summer wanes.
Next on the list: goldenrod, asters, maples announce

their fall. Day lilies, day lilies! Autumn is not far away.
Sleep, children. Afternoons, arguments, what you wish

to flee melts into late summer's shadows. Cicadas
thrum eternal tunes. Somnolent planet. It's all just fine.

Hot Dog

Listen up, teen-age nannies
in training. Here's how
to earn a buck, with luck.
I too earned dough, baby sitting.
Nearly every Saturday night.
All through high school's sexy
summers. My client list was
stable. They knew I was reliable.
I would watch TV, read, paint.

Their children slept peacefully.
On my watch I made sure
kids were tucked in, cozy.
The air conditioners hummed.
I made sure the doors were
locked. And I waited, thumbed
worn women's magazines, books
of naughty limericks, the Bible.
Sometimes I would doodle,
drawing horses, birds, dollar signs.
I'd imagine living in big houses,
comfy, plenty of pillows, money.
Finally, the sound of tires
on the gravel outside. Partying
parents returned, payment
was made. Fathers, well oiled,
would drive me home. We all
had good manners. The lettuce
would help pay for college.
One night, one of those dads,
one hand on the steering wheel,
quickly unzipped his fly, tugging
in the musky dark, offered
me the thrill of touching his
meaty penis. His sleeping
child dreamed of joys and terrors
proffered by school in the fall.
Then I moved on to write poems
as autumn leaves fell. Pigs were
rounded up for slaughter.