

How do you measure a journey defined as a series of thresholds? The voice of *New Life* is associative, yet declarative and nuanced. “In one suburb of this longing, a cognac leather sling. / Collapse,” offers the poem “House Sitter,” “Baby’s first forgiving tale, the legs curved // like French heels.” JoAnna Novak’s poems thrive in liminal spaces—“Beyond copse and corpse, hedgerow and scarlet hip”—before focusing on distinct anxieties: “the tent is white and obvious. Inside, a bride // begins her tour.” This collection encourages multiple reads, a chance to swim and dive deep in the generous phrasing and soundplay. But the deft lineation provides a way of surfacing: of navigating upwards towards air, toward truth.

—Sandra Beasley

If a third-trimester Holly Golightly, famished and sporting an island-tan, had been written by Jean Rhys for a leading role as a haberdasher in *Rosemary’s Baby*, we might suspect JoAnna Novak of plagiarizing a lost cult classic. By turns notational and orgiastic, bored and braced for all hell to break loose, this paean to birth, in its myriad forms, is whistled through “water to sozzle some joy.” At the biopsychic threshold of I and thou, relations here are “tiresome / relaxing,” estuarial, gaslit and groped, with a casual dose of the to boost the tlc. From Tibet to Terebithia, the Île St. Louis to “ill Illinois,” Auckland to Pizza Hut, Novak’s wanderlust for life is ginormous, her “mind / so orchestral” we’re flooded with thought, with alien arias “souling the throat”—loop-de-loo, oohkay, achoo! Lithe as Pavlova, as miffed as Godzilla, imperious as Cleopatra among “a galère of gardenia girls,” her inventories of affection comprise a sonogrammatology of a self who brings beginning into being.

—Andrew Zawacki

# NEW LIFE

JoAnna Novak



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to N-

*Will you glimmer on the sea?*  
—H.D., “Moonrise”

# I

\*

*What in the straining body can be immobilized?*  
—Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

## Progress

You are as long as a gerbil, toilet paper tube, cassette tape, harmless bit  
of pipe—

I file you away, my scarlet clue. Half an ear on ice then nose to powder,  
I vitamin in the garden underneath the peacock umbrella.

And brochures call this power?

I was asleep at the table, dreaming of a foil swan, chewing  
a napkin or a Buddha's hand, I didn't care, anything would do.

Free food all over. And more when everything's a measure:  
sleeve of crackers, packet of peanut butter—  
in the conservatory, in the dining room, study, the lobby.

Big as a butternut, round as a watermelon, you are so hungry  
you swallow the revolver, the wrench, the room key

and me, my whole life.

## New life

does not survive on protein alone. My ankles are bound to tear marching this reef, yet what a thrill—bloodying white pumps. The island is mine. A mole on earth's back, bull's eye, bingo, scratch, bite. At seven and twelve and thirteen weeks, the pulse shimmers like a firefly: interruption.

Suddenly the weight is bready, tedious. Hammocks tilt, Zombies spoil the lagoon. I shouldn't take such immoderate companions for granted, but it's hot and the clams are bad in the shallows. Tiring of fish and tea, dreaming of chips and beer, I am told: Pack a suitcase. Keep near an open line.

The island is round and lovely green  
from the perimeter massy buggy rotten  
marshy sore-breeding vomitory delusion-  
invoking Stockholm syndromic desperation  
forty feet from shore—adorable, ordeal, ordure.  
A crow helicopters hopes of rescue. I wave  
the arms I have. I do not need civilization  
nor another Fiji. Triple prison, please. Inter-  
coastal. Tied to a shock. Tethered to stones.  
Beaten by waves. Buffeted into orgasm.

I need shipwreck ribs to get off. Privacy done as coconut fluff.  
I wish for garters, typing paper, pompom earrings, ice, rubber,  
raspberries, raffia cord, black bikinis, the augury of fingers  
and wrists in a room where I can loosen from myself,  
a vacancy that means ...

## The Hungry

Some hide their suffering behind black glasses. Others try new haircuts. On the lawn they hear a gospel of sons preached by a man in shorts. I do not join the picnic. I spend my days on the balcony, watch the syncretists in the courtyard, look out over the water at the rock. In the distance, it collects moss and barnacles. Why do I call the rock a rock? The rock is a mountain, hard, intrusive, protruding on the horizon.

Now, the sky dark. The lawn emptied—most have left, full and moist. The rock gone with the sun, sun sunk in caldera, if I cannot see it, I cannot sleep. The rock disinvents lying on my back, my side. I dream on foot, leaving the room as a vapor. To stand, to swim, to boat to it, coat it in wishes and footprints: is that too much to beg for confinement?

(Here comes a husband, beer strapped to his back—some kindness.)

Morning, the rock is breakfast under a dome: Mont Blanc. Along the balcony, I roll the empty stroller. I can be honest with the child. I hate its topography, but I like to watch the rock. The rock invites teens, wine, lilac skies, cummy tummies, tiki life, sloshed life, lost life until the stars show up the sun and I'm back to eavesdropping gospels. Hollow rock, bladder bloat: swollen balloon in reeds. Me spelling rearview sermons, cursing the cost of vacation.

## Trimester

Venomous, the arm shows red and assertive,  
sensate all along. Harder to spear the insula

or shore this dark brain,  
the manifest throbbing—pulse

is perfect, blood pressure cuffed,  
even these veins are good—  
succulent, fat  
(python in reeds, pining for a kill).

Little flinching. The paper skirt over me  
stays dry and still.

But here, let's have some light,

little boy (our checkup tests fluorescents).

The doctor stands and pretends  
to come through the door once more,  
urges my uterus under the paper  
(piss-sopper, jelly-wipe, quilted, pink).

*You've got it pretty bad*, he spills,  
pills from the keyboard, pills swivel-click,

purse bugs,  
water bugs,  
Hydroxycut,  
minus a line in my palm.

\*\*

He works his wedding band frown,  
tells me  
*No one would be better off without you.*  
(Just lie down.)

Pill prayer, pill prize, the exemplars are so familiar, mouse down  
the gulch, hatchery jaw, jam it in, jam it now,  
deeper, harder, attagirl:

diabetes insulin  
stress fracture rest  
pens peanuts bees.

He touches his arm. Imagine infected  
flesh, rashy and hot.

Truth or silent dare?  
(Just taste the word: *crutch*.)

*You are a mom now*, he says, wifemothermarm,  
mothball, mum, mutterer. From him,  
a wrinkled whitecoat? Give me grander

reptiles on this inhospitable island. Garter on a swing tray,  
diamondback tub,  
Animal, I don't want to go in the pool  
and I won't lose my tongue

and I won't like your table. Give me ether,  
at least twilit sleep, Tonga Room  
dreams, trek over stream,  
rain and rum on the half hour—

Stethoscope speaks: *You're a little too familiar*  
*with terms*—ideation, ideation, passive

ideation—well, damn you, diction,  
thoughts, mots, motile woman,  
back to your continental shelf!

*This is not the way things have to be.*

Your mouth might stay.  
Your face will freeze. When your eyes cross,  
you'll regret that Mother Hubbard you don't like a saint.  
You'll never be free again (poor mussel in a sack).

\*\*

I have a hand; he shakes it.

Elevator, garage, pack:  
my leave.

Do you blight me, little boy?  
Reprieve this wet channel,  
our runaway atoll, baby  
island, sweet Terabithia of  
everything impossible?

The antidote is encyclopedic:  
*Isolation can be achieved in many ways, most often*  
*through some geographical context.*

This beach is dark and endless  
—not a problem.

## N is for Nurture

No, don't  
believe me;

I don't  
believe me

either.  
I was

the only  
one

without  
an

empty  
stomach.

## Cock: Anamnesis, 04.19.19

I wanted a private beach. He wanted to take me below the bank and let me open the safe. Cocking his head, the miracle man showed me his miry root. Ruckling. Spoiled. He wanted to crack my knuckles, puddle my ink, twist me by the pinky, fat me on roses, raze the islands in my fingerprints, blur the whorls.

Everything was lost when I took off my sunglasses, but the man insisted. Have a sonogram! His baize daybed, algal fountain. He likes me big and blind and behaving—at least until siesta. Then, I can waddle the grounds, see the poquitas, feed the nannies pineapple leather. All I have to do is keep my leash. Say I am leashed to his cock. Kissing it, bleeding, hurting for it: no, I don't faint. Finally, I get to the beach.

I saw it from a distance, a wing where earth meets sky. This morning, I'm sure, I saw it still. I face what I know is there. I don't say much anymore: our plane disappeared in the mountains.

# Gaslight

Far away, closets open. Out come the towels. White coats the walls.

Vidal, voila, this hair!

A clatter kitchens: liver in fry pan, yogurt-clot drain, coffin fridge, spit.

Rattles, babbles, crochet clicks. Cheepy birds, pecky crabs, gurgles.

*What have you done to him?*

Summoning props to rehearsal, minus moral dilemma, the weeks went aimless, wandering.

What's in a crib?

Give it a paint. Oil the wheels. Mattress, counterpane.

Witchy.

Lose the drapes, let in Manhattan.

(Far away, the Hudson's plenitude: give thanks.)

—or, seventy-five times, raise and lower the shoulders, palms together in prayer: *grant me freedom to mean more.*

Crazy girl, why would you watch that?

