

A WHITE PAGE
DEMANDS
ITS LETTERS

POEMS BY TONI ORTNER

MAYAPPLE PRESS 2016

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Published by Mayapple Press
362 Chestnut Hill Road
Woodstock, NY 12498
mayapplepress.com

ISBN 978-1-936419-70-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016910223

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Black Sun, New Moon: Special Women's Issue of Hyperion: "Selecting Letters" (1980, Carolina Wren Press); *Life Generations, Dancing* (privately printed limited edition): "When you tried to tell me" and "You say nothing is lost" (published as "Lady Luck"); *Redstart Magazine*: "To my father before triple bypass surgery"; *Vermont Literary Review*: "Mommy is going away"; vermontviews.org: "How it was when he left", "Suddenly, you cannot find the words", "The Guru", "The house is drawn with fat wax crayons".

Cover art and design by Judith Kerman. Photo of author by Phil Innes. Book designed and typeset by Ameer Schmidt with titles in Alliance and text in Californian FB.

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This book is dedicated to Wanda J. Jones

Daddy,

Mommy is going away.
She is going into the roses.

You clip the hedges.
You mark in your precise script the name of each individual rose.
You portion out the tablespoons of fertilizer.
You arrange the furniture in the dining room.

Daddy,
Mommy is going going away.
She has already gone into the roses
while she sits at your dining room table
her outstretched hand
offering
your nightly scotch and soda.

Daddy,
My Mommy has gone has gone into the roses.
All day every day I search through the green leaves
my fingers pricked by sharp thorns bleed
& I cannot find her & I need.

Daddy,

This is my real voice
I no longer abjure it.

It's not the sweet one you want to keep
nailed to your office wall
the little girl with the blond curls
dressed in blue velvet.

Daddy,
more and more each day
I become that shadow
at the edge of the photograph

the dark one you sensed
could never
place.

Solitude

Strange birds crashing into my windows
gigantic spiders crawling out from secret places in the walls
these are the things I must contend with
in my solitude.

Hours staring out the back window
after the sun goes down
staring into the blackness of a night without stars
at the circle
cast by a spotlight
illuminating a small area
cleared in three days of heavy work
with shears and a chain saw.

Hacking away at heavy undergrowth
fires of smoke
drifting all day in branches of trees
to make room for one small thicket of dogwood trees to grow and
breathe.

waiting for the sound of your car
I can hear coming miles away

the stubble of the bare ground rakes my eyes
like your beard/my cheek.

Blue gray feathers carpet the ground.
The fat cat licks his paws.

A cold current runs
through the house of unborn children.

I dreamed I sat in a rowboat at the fork of a river

swirled round in circles oars uplifted
trying to decide which fork to take.

I rowed against the current
woke
before I reached the shore.

When you tried to tell me how after the mastectomy
you kept on dreaming of little men
who chased you down the streets with butcher knives
tied you down to the table with ropes
swarming like bees all over your body
no way to escape to stand up and run
from their intentions
I pretended I did not hear.

When you tried to show me
the side of your chest that was hacked off
how neatly the scar healed
a straight seam of stitches sewn
into your flesh
I turned aside

so as not to confront the hollow space
that once held the most beautiful snow white apple
in the world

smell of apples scent of apples
seeds inside like stars
to bury my head into
such sweet juice on my tongue
O my Mamma of the emptied goblet

how I
love
you.

You say nothing is lost as long as there is life.
The sun rises on possibility.
Remember how Grandma won Queen of the Day and got a
radio set and toaster.

You may have seven springs left if luck goes with you
if luck is truly a lady as we like to believe.

Continuity means born from your womb
I can never be separate.

Mother, I build you a house of many mansions
letter by letter.

How grateful I am
you still lie by my side
your dear face
a dark blossom upon the white pillow.

We gallop through the moonlit fields
as if we possessed one pair of lungs
as if this small bed under its canopy of trees
were a kingdom
which
indeed
it is.