

Gestating Creatures

By Bridgette James

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CONTENT WARNING

This chapbook contains themes of infertility, pregnancy loss, miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, and infant death, as well as references to medical procedures, postnatal depression, and cultural and religious pressures around motherhood.

Table of Contents

1. I Posed for Egon Schiele on a Gynaecological Ward
 2. Go Back to the Root Word
 3. A Spell Would Have Fixed Me
 4. The Meaning of the Ten Commandments for Conception
 5. An IVF Cycle When Your Body is a Natural Barricade
 6. Jellyfish Babies in the Marshall Islands, 1954
 7. An Alga-Mum
 8. Rebekah's One-Night Stand
 9. A New Husband's Nightmare
 10. Hypnic Jerk
 11. Baby is a Shapeshifter
 12. A Marital Spat on the Insect Channel
 13. The Monoxenous Life Cycle of a Parasite
 14. The Little Things I Did
 15. Bethel, the House of God
 16. Pronatalism in Europe
 17. Full Term
 18. Baby Blues
- Acknowledgments
- About the Poet

1. I Posed for Egon Schiele on a Gynaecological Ward

My skin is the sombre grey of a cadaver,
speckled with purple veins — a carbon copy
of Schiele's emaciated mother,

Like a tipped palette cup, I spew green bile.
Mum's baby-bump massages are synchronised
with the chorus of her song. 'Think of a name.'

'Spare me your dose of laughing gas, Mum.'
So, breaths laboured, she soothes a patient
with frenzied prayers instead of analgesics.

'Papa God, you glued Michal's womb shut.
And blessed Hannah, who fasted and prayed.
Bless my daughter with a son.'

Schiele unmasks Mum's God — a habit's hood falls off a face.
God is colluding with a sinister monk,
stealthily waiting to snatch my foetus.

The truth is a long epidural needle entering my spine.
And I'm pregnant with Schiele's fear of dying —
in the first trimester of a foetus's life.

Mum says, 'A childless Krio woman wears
that shame like a flamboyant head wrap.'
And at my age, I am a brittle oil painting.

The impious monk's prediction is inked
into the verso of Schiele's canvas:
'This sitter's womb will be her baby's coffin.'

Reference: *Pregnant Woman and Death* (1911), by Egon Schiele

2. Go Back to the Root Word

'After Absence has a grammar', by Fiona Larkin, Poetry Society

I shudder when I hear the word endometriosis.
My GP says, 'It means you bleed where you shouldn't.'

Because like a Black nightshade, I am gamopetalous.
Each month, one of my *diseased* petals falls off.

But the other consanguineous petals bleed too.
And stolen from a tiger lily, my pollen stains everything:

an ex-fiancé's cheap duvet cover or his luxurious sheets.
Because my naughty petals are replicating as fast as yeast.

The GP says, 'Uterine tissues were found in sites
outside your — metra-[...] where they don't belong.'

The mitochondria in my cells are programmed
to challenge a territorial body, demarcating boundaries.

If I dropped the suffix *-osis*, in *endo-metri-osis*
it shifts the focus off the anomaly all GPs accentuate.

I can celebrate the root: *endo*, meaning *inside* in Greek.
Endo is a synonym for *in vitro* and the antonym of:

dumped on a Petri dish — like my shrivelled up embryo.
Endo means *what goes inside*. In a Dilation and Curettage,

I am *the curette* the GP says *goes in situ* to *clean a uterus*
and make it nursery-ready for a thriving foetus.

3. A Spell Would Have Fixed Me

I regress in REM sleep.
I am a frightened eighteen-year-old
in a hut in Gloucester Village.



A Murray man is saying:
Drink this potion for fertility.



He blows incense at me
to banish baby-snatching spirits.



An agnostic,
I disseminate sweat
into rising incense smoke,
engulfing me in a cloud
of mythical beliefs.



A mist shrouds a father changing
into a chin-shoving ogre, saying,
Don't blow bad luck at me.
You spat out God's concoction.
So, you'll be as barren as Abraham's wife.



Tensions erupt into a holy war
under a sacred geometric motif
of Abraham on the ceiling —
his arms sprawled out
like an ominous cloud.



A gourd's rim brushes my chin.
I spill anointed palm wine
on Dad's Sunday suit and a prayer mat.



The Murray man stuffs three raffia
and matchstick-dolls into a virgin's gourd,
snarls at me: *One sacrifice for the Father,*
one sacrifice for the Son,
one sacrifice for our Ancestral Spirits.

4. The Meaning of the Ten Commandments for Conception

The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction.'

— Exodus 24:12, New International Version

POV: I am a tampon encased in a cervix of fertility myths, absorbing Mum's words, like the prophet Moses.

1. 'Wear a calabash over your stomach at night,' **i.e.**, only a bad sea otter lies on her back so her babies wouldn't lounge on her belly.
2. 'When you sleep with a man, it should align with your natal moon sign,' **i.e.**, you are a water baby born during a monsoon storm with no sacred moon to guide your path.
3. 'Baby spirits roam the earth looking for a hollow space to live in,' **i.e.**, full of abnormalities, your womb has no space for tenants.
4. 'You are under an umbrella of curses put on a lastborn in a family,' **i.e.**, button up your shame in a raincoat.
5. 'Your babies are meandering in a witch doctor's gourd,' **i.e.**, your genes lack the stamina to swim out of the vessel of mediocrity.
6. 'In our culture, using a fertility chart brings bad luck,' **i.e.**, you are a sinner, trapped in the grids of an ovulation chart.

7. 'Avoid vinegar,' **i.e.**, God will never bless you, a Nazarite who drinks fermented wine.
8. 'Don't use the bathroom straight after,' **i.e.**, because you must keep God's holy seed inside you to bear fruit.
9. 'You shouldn't have used the pill,' **i.e.**, but you swallow an embryologist's empty promises every day.
10. (She reads a gardening magazine and becomes a peppery sage.) 'Fresh sap's translucency deceptively hides deficiencies. Jason wears tight trousers — they should test his sap,' **i.e.**, so whoever marries him won't ingest spoiled juice.

5. An IVF Cycle When your Body is a Natural Barricade

a mollusc's / slow-moving zygotes / are slippery as eels /
like a magnanimous ocean / a torrent of woman-made
hindrances fortifies her womb /
as if it isn't a retreat for elegant seahorses /
or an endangered species of daring zygote-swimmers /
baiting the gravity of a sperm's wave / to transport them to a
human habitat / her babies are drowning / under a whale of
problems / craftily concealed in the twists of her conical
shell /

6. Jellyfish Babies in the Marshall Islands, 1954

I am a moon jellyfish, releasing my planula into the Pacific
but an ichthyologist observes,

‘So many slimy ephyrae, yet none looks right.’

‘Think quality, not numbers.

Because the same opening is a jellyfish’s mouth and anus,
your gonads are a conduit for nuclear waste.’

I ask him,

‘Doesn’t a jellyfish mum have enough oral arms
to cuddle all sorts of ephyrae?’

‘Because thousands of frilly tentacles frame your mouth,’
says the ichthyologist,

‘they make a mother’s desperation hard to understand.’

7. An Alga-Mum...

*[My species is scintillating noctiluca.
We deprive baby fishes of oxygen
& hide shoals of corpses
under the camouflage
of a neon-blue sea.]*



When I illuminate the route
of a sonographer's probe to my uterus
with my echogenic polyps,
I watch her — on an ultrasound monitor —
poke a gestational sac full of amniotic fluid.
She asks, *why's a dead foetus trapped
in the stalks of your shiny polyps?*

8. Rebekah's One-Night Stand

In the Bible, Isaac slept with Rebekah
and 'God gave them Esau and Jacob.'
Barren for two decades,
I let 'an Isaac' from Bull's Tavern *shag* me.
Tipsy I lip-synched his words:
All African women are fertile.
They say twins run in your genes.

*

When I opened 'the gates of Mount Zion',
'an Isaac' said: *I've come inside you, babes.*
But in the Bible, Esau and Jacob struggled —
because 'two nations' were in 'Rebekah's womb' —
so at forty, I tried and *Failed to Send* a text to 'an Isaac'
to say: *I've had a miscarriage.*
I really wanted mixed-race twins.

9. A New Husband's Nightmare

after our nuptials
i was a nymphomaniac
intoxicated with lust for Priapus
the musicality of our bodies' rhythm
replaced absent birds
once i led him to woodlands to use
trees to shield our nakedness sow his seeds in my fields
and grow Tyrian purple flowers among uterine couch grass
in desynchronised sleep my voice begged
embrace me before flies feed on my lust
or Anemoi's wind slams my fertility window shut
but Priapus smelt my natural scent my embalmer's myrrh
he sneezed up a storm my mask slipped
Cronos my alter ego regained consciousness

10. Hypnic Jerk

Eyes shut, trance-like, with hypnic jerks,
I plunge into a luminous abyss of water,
swallowing its gin and tonic.

I float on psychedelic waves.
You appear — a Freudian optical illusion.
Translucent, we merge into each other.

Together, like paired clam shells,
we are submerged by iridescent bubbles.
We cuddle dolphins, sink to the seabed

to lay egg-babies in multicoloured coral
scatter pearl beads in memory of the embryo I lost,
wish our foetuses luck growing into mermaids

or mermen. Or unconditioned — both. Wish fulfilment
because we are liberated, aquatic nocturnal creatures
picking flowers, yellow-horned poppies, bending seaweed

to make necklaces, we adorn to celebrate that the world
is my oyster — utopia. But unreachable, the sea-horizon
stretches far beyond the neural path, out of my line of vision,

and the anaesthesia of sleep wears off. That bloody alarm.
I stir, stumble out — a drunk somnambulist.
Your bedspace is bare. Your memory

wrapped up in duvet covers, tossed in an octagonal shape
replicating your octopus groin tattoo
with enough tentacles for a blanket hug.

You exist in two hemispheres, solid matter —
my ex, in a starfish-framed photo on my bedside locker,
in my subconscious — the amorous spirit in my dreams.

11. Baby is a Shapeshifter

At the hospital, Baby did not pass out of my body in the form my mum wished — *a squealing grandchild with an umbilical cord* to attach to an owner.

In a morgue, it became *foetal remains*, wrapped in a tie-dye blanket Mum gave me, because *in our family we cocoon babies in soft, woolly fabrics*.

An undertaker dumped the remains into a biodegradable box as if Baby were recyclable rubbish and labelled her: *For cremation*.

‘A *whole corpse*,’ said Mum, ‘should be in a padded coffin, waiting for *a proper Krio burial*, committed intact, six feet under, *to our Maker*.’

Baby’s melted heart and charred delicate digits filled an angel-urn, a crematorium operator handed over to me — *as cremains*. *A keepsake for a heartbroken mum*.

I placed Baby / *foetal remains* / *cremains* / and the angel-urn on a mantelpiece above an electric fireplace — to help preserve the ashes in case Baby tries to shapeshift back into a human being.

12. A Marital Spat on the Insect Channel

A chloropid fly she makes a buzzing noise,
her tongue contorts into the shape of a maggot.
The male's wings flop down cover his ears.
An entomologist says, 'It's a male's defence mechanism
against she-bug complaints. The buzzing her mum taught
her is boring. It's the cackle she-bugs who want to live
their lives through their children emit nonstop.
Soon, she'll undergo a multitude of instars to rewire her.
So she'll only buzz about football.'

13. The Monoxenous Life Cycle of a Parasite

The infective stage:

a parasite moved into a host's fallopian tube
a swelling fooled a Nan she kissed a parasite said *it must be a boy*
she said *you're another Leah she birthed six sons and a daughter*

The diagnostic stage:

during an imaging scan a parasite's suckers
sent high-frequency shock waves
through an anaemic host she yelled *Mum I'm not Leah I am a parasite-harboured*

The trophozoite stage

the nib of a surgeon's pen punctured a hole through the
epidermis of false hope
he said *a parasitoid must die for its host to survive*

Addendum:

a parasite extracted in a salpingostomy is christened
Moses a baby hiding in reeds i.e., the host's scar tissue
a parasite was sucking like it was a dummy to wean it off its
mum

14. The Things I Did

The things I did to show I was pro-life when the gynaecologist said, *another foetus is growing where it shouldn't, unlike viable embryos* —

- I transferred a mother's affection to the ceramic dolls on the top shelf of my cabinet, little baby-replicas, accepting that my anatomy cannot house precious living things.
- I sniffed out the stench of death around my house – to confront Thanatos's claim to my unborn baby, taunt him with a menacing, *you can't kill this one or that one*.
- I replanted my dying Chusan palm tree in the front garden instead, burying its roots in moist soil like nature intended, to make it catch a glimpse of the British sun, as if I could manipulate events, play God, alter the existence of a living creature I had control over before its lifespan expired.
- I masked death with misleading vital signs of life — luscious palm leaves, a foetal heartbeat of a doomed pregnancy.
- I replied to the advert in my inbox – “Learn to tend carnations, marigold buds, chrysanthemum petals” – *Can what symbolises death ever bring joy to the living?*

15. Bethel, the House of God

A raccoon
burrowed deep
into a basement,
built a bunker to shelter in —
a pelvic retreat for all seasons.
His forepaws raked nerve ends.
He banded tissues together
and created a rugged monument
—
like 'Jacob's pillar of stones in
Bethel.'
He tattooed adhesions on the
stones
and then audaciously erected a
sign:

*Any Man Who Enters This Basement Will Be Dowsed in Lethal
Raccoon Saliva.*

16. Pronatalism in Europe

After Baggies, by Sharon Black – Poetry Society

All a televangelist on the God Channel says is
'**All** termite queens use their stomachs to
replicate God's Garden of Eden' and '**All** they
do is have larvae' and '**All** termite kings do is
mate with a queen' and '**All** termite kings help
look after nymphs' and '**All** workers do is mind
little larvae' and '**All** soldiers do is guard
newborns' and '**All** gardeners loathe
aggressive fire ant invaders' and 'If **all** termites
didn't procreate their species, won't imported
fire ants outnumber them?', and **all** his
congregants say in chorus, '**All** descendants
of fire ant invaders should go back to their
home countries.'

17. Full Term

the receptors in your
amygdala
sensed your fear of two
ominous blue lines
your head becomes a
washing machine spinning
your body's signal was a
prophecy
about trips to A&E
you're high risk said a
midwife
(you killed three foetuses)
one the size of an almond
revealed itself on a monitor
*it didn't circumvent your
womb*
like a lost meteorite orbiting
your intestines
all accounted for said a
sonographer counting
digits you started counting
time
with heartbeats three
months in
seven more to go
the midwife said *October 6th is
your due date*
you were a sprinter
in an obstacle race seven
hurdles down
three more to go
mum poked your *dollop of
fufu* and said
boys lie on your back

boys make you throw up
avoid palm oil salt wine
and sex
you made a note in an app
ignore incoming calls from
mum
but you craved her cinnamon
garlic cayenne pepper
ginger *and ogeri*
a mother is an expert on your
body
your GP's *case notes* said
her spices *heal*
your *hyperemesis gravidarum*
he called you
an unmarried first-time mum
and asked *is it a wanted*
pregnancy
(as if you were a
contradiction) but you'd
learnt
from a pet hen in your
chicken coop in Freetown
how to fuss fret over an
egg you gestated
even the midwife said
make sure you call us
when your waters break
(because you were a novice
who flooded a kitchen
floor like your broken
washing machine)
but your mum was there to
sever
an umbilical cord and save a
baby
she called *your very own*

trophy

18. Baby Blues

My newborn is an Aurora Borealis —
 appearing on wintry nights. Face aglow at 11AM.
Charged, her solar particles travel to the flat downstairs.

I binge on Kenyan coffee, roll my eyes at God,
 eat chilli stimulants, watch '*Baby Blood*' on replay,
let off protons at the neighbour hollering expletives.

I put on my newborn's rotating ceiling lights.
 A teddy bear's shadow spirals around her bedspace.
She cries, shakes a fist at it like it's an elusive dad.

I gravitate towards a front door, pass a knife block,
 remember the tiger in *Baby Blood*, confront a neighbour
above my newborn's screams. A gullible Yanka,

this baby will lead me into an ominous void.
 Her shrieks will break granite, scatter clay bricks.
Six flats, five irate landlords, four noise complaints —

every brown envelope contains a red letter. Sapped, I close my eyes
 when she suckles. Shadows on the walls spaghettify
into cosmic noodles. Fear crawls out of my skin.

I pull out hair extensions. My newborn bawls
 when I forget to charge the electric meter. I hunt for her
face in the pitch darkness of her new bedroom

like it's an accretion disk for a depressed mother
 to illuminate her way out of a black hole
two-hundred and twenty-five times the size of the Sun.

Reference: *Baby Blood*, Ciné-Ressources, 1989.

Glossary

1. *Aso ebi* — a uniform dress worn by West African women.
2. A Murray man — a Sierra Leonean term for an herbalist.
3. Gloucester village — a hilltop village in Freetown, Sierra Leone
4. *Ogeri* — a condiment made from Benin seeds.
5. Palm wine — is an alcoholic drink made from the sap of a palm tree.
6. Yanka — a character in the 1990 French cult horror film '*Baby Blood*'.

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About Bridgette James

Bridgette was a Metropolitan Police Special Constable. She was shortlisted for the 2024 Bridport Prize for Poetry and commended in the Renard Press Poetry Prize in 2025. She won the Fiction Factory Summer Poetry Prize 2024.

Her poems and stories have appeared in *Maudlin House*, *Ginosko Journal*, *Bristol Noir Fiction*, *Allegro*, *Gutter*, *The Lake*, *Dreich*, *London Grip*, *Wildfire Words*, *The Write Launch*, *Leon Review*, *Cerasus Magazine*, *La Piccioletta Barca* and other publications. She was longlisted for the Aurora National Prize for Writing in 2022. A 2023 anthology she edited, *‘What the Seashell Said to Me’*, is held in the National Poetry Library.

She holds a First Class BSc (Hons) in Criminology and Social Policy from the Open University.

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