PERSONAL VOICES

Poor Mother

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We have a new baby in our family. Soon after Amy was born, our oldest son introduced himself to the woman who was building a house behind ours.

"And how many children are there in your family?" she asked politely.

"Five," he answered. "I'm 15. My brother and sister are in junior high. Thatcher is in first grade, and my baby sister is just three weeks old."

"Your poor mother!" the woman gasped. "She's got them spread all over the place."

She herself has birds—28 of them inhabit a glass aviary built into the living room of her hexagonal house. When she and her husband want to go away for a weekend, she hires my daughter (at $2.50 a day) to scoop a ration of worms from the box in the refrigerator each morning before school and return again at bedtime to see that none of her feathered specimens is hanging upside down from a perch. She pays 50¢ extra for watering philodendron.

"Aren't you noble," she said sardonically on our first meeting, after asking again: "How many children do you have?" We climbed the circular stair to her book-lined loft where she showed me her typewriter and her seven published volumes. "We have one bedroom in this house," she said, pointing to the extra mattress which can be pulled out from under the eaves if needed. Perhaps her next book will be about birds. There are six about horses, one about ships, and two children's stories in manuscript on her publisher's desk.

My children like our new neighbor, especially since she invited them to sled on her long unshoveled driveway. "Anytime after eleven." Perhaps on closer acquaintance I will like her too. But for the moment she remains the Bird Lady and I the Woman with the Green Tomato Mincemeat and the Kids. I didn't want to disillusion her by telling her I too had a study and a typewriter. She had sterotyped me before we met—and I her. Would it surprise her to know that some mornings I manage to sit for three hours at a time reading Erasmus in my bathrobe in the sun? Perhaps not, but for now I prefer to keep my secret. We all need myths with which to justify and ratify our lives. I went home feeling like the cat who swallowed her canary.

"Your poor mother!" I would once have slithered uncomfortably under that label, suspecting that in both senses it fit. I did feel inadequate to my calling. I did lament my lot. Not now. Yet this is strange, for by anybody's definition Amy was an ill-timed baby. After 15 years of peanut butter and Legos, my days were about to become open from eight-thirty until three. After a decade of eking out a course here and a course there, I could think about some serious teaching and at last begin research for my dissertation. The house was almost finished, the bedrooms and closets fitted out for four children, and in one corner of the dining room the old iron

crib had been converted to an amusing settee. All six of us had bicycles and could ride them, and the worn Hike-a-poose could now be changed to a rucksack for those long-planned treks in the Presidential Range. Certainly in our laddered and lofted castle in the woods there was no room for an infant.

Yet along came Amy. The castle has a new Princess and whether it is she or I, I cannot determine. I grow sentimental. I grow saccharine. I can't imagine anything so delightful as a five-month-old baby who sleeps irregularly, eats often, and has already learned to tear the pages of books. I suppress all thought of Terrible Twos and of the possible traumas in coping with one lone teenager at fifty. I revel in her cushioned cheeks and pearled toes.

At different times during the weeks after Amy was born, three friends, all non-Mormons, came by to tell me they were jealous. Their children, corresponding in ages to my older ones, have grown independent. Chauffeuring is their most insistent need. After school their children run to the soccer field with scarcely a glance at the proferred cookie. They take baths, ask to go to dances, and sleep out in igloos carved scientifically in the snow. They criticize their mother's driving and their father's taste in ties. They talk about college and dream of fame. "Are we getting old?" We laughed. "Sometimes I feel as though my only function is to stand at the door and shout: 'You forgot to make your bed!' " We joked about the "empty nest syndrome," compared symptoms, and recognized in each other the same bittersweet pangs. "But you have Amy!" And so I do. My friends will sigh and exclaim over pink noses in the supermarket, but they will go on to practice the harpsichord, begin a masters in nutrition, or take up pharmacy again. And I, because I am Mormon to the core and because the Prophet thunders, will raise Amy and be glad.

That bald and toothless infant over there on the floor inching her way to the foot of my study stair is not Number Five. She is Amy. I think of another friend, a woman of scholarly attainment and demographic conviction. A month or two ago I met her at a community function. She rushed over to me smiling broadly. "Congratulations!" I must have shown my surprise for throughout my pregnancy she had studiously ignored my condition, so skillfully in fact that I had begun to wonder if the twenty-five extra pounds I was carrying showed. "For getting your article accepted," she finished cheerfully. "Babies don't count." I love her bluntness and in my own upside-down way I am convinced she is right: "Babies don't count." Amy is my sister and my neighbor and my child and I hope someday she will be my friend, but she is not a rung on my ladder to the Celestial Kingdom.

Writing this I recognize that articles don't count either. As my friend described her own work, an intricate and incredibly detailed reconstruction of an entire county over three generations, I knew that she knew it too. "The picture is emerging, but it will take us another ten years at least. It doesn't matter. I love it. I live there." Anyone who has faced an academic tenure committee knows the old joke about deans who can count but not read. Occasionally, even on the fringes of the university, with no need to get or hold a job, I am seized with the panic to get my name in print. I am beginning to recognize, however, how those first articles and books can be mere sops to the ego, means to the inner quiet which will allow the slow nurturing of a work of love.

A few weeks ago, my oldest son commented at dinner: "We have four writers in the neighborhood."

"Is that right? Who?" I asked.

"The new neighbor. Mr. Weesner [his first novel was a Book of the Month Club selection]. Mr. Williams [he won the National Book Award last year]. And you." I laughed, though he wasn't teasing, and I knew that he was right. As I look at Amy, I know that my own self-possession has something to do with the pleasure I feel in her growth. Sometimes when I hear young mothers in our ward lament their inadequacies, talking like the poor mother I used to be, I want to stand up and pontificate: "Get out of the house. Find out what you're good at. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Learn and grow." But I don't, for I know that I am not a happier and better mother at 37 than I was at 22 because I have taken night courses or written essays or read Erasmus, but because at 37 I have begun to understand the fruitful and uneasy and joyful and sometimes terrifying relationship between the woman I am and the woman I would like to be. That kind of learning can neither be hurried nor forced.

A Latter-day Ode to Irrigation

DEAN MAY

In 1907 J. J. McClellan, then organist for the Mormon Tabernacle, published a new choral suite under the extravagant title, "Ode to Irrigation." The first of five choruses described in heavy Victorian prose a truly awesome primeval desert landscape where, "the candlesticks of the cactus flame torches here uphold," and "bones of man and beast lie together under the miragemock of death." After a brief blossoming under the ministrations of Pueblo Indians the land became again a Dantesque inferno until "to the throbbing of the fervent earth" the pioneers entered the scene. The composer chose a male chorus, backed by a soprano obbligato to announce that shortly after the Mormons came "green-walled thickets are choral with songs of birds," and the once lethal desert was transformed into a "land of leafy glades." The full chorus joined in the *finale*, "Glorious Land," to be sung "With fire and patriotic fervor."

Excesses of romantic hyperbole tend to conceal from the twentieth-century observer the core of truth which underlies this, as so much of folk literature. The land before 1847 was not as blasted as the lyricist suggested, nor as verdant thereafter. The transformation nonetheless had been dramatic. To many of those who sang "The Ode to Irrigation" in 1907 the changes they had seen meant the difference between dire necessity and comfortable plenty. With this thought in mind, we can no doubt forgive the Saints for singing such mauve poetry "With fire and patriotic fervor."

A writer more in the modern taste, Bernard DeVoto, chose metaphors almost as strong in describing the accomplishment of his Mormon grandfather, Jonathan Dye, in cultivating the desert:

> Through a dozen years of Jonathan's journal we observe the settlers of Easton [Uinta] combining to bring water to their fields. On the bench lands above their valley, where gulches and canyons come down from the Wasatch, they made canals, which led along the hills. From the canals smaller ditches flowed down to each man's fields, and from these ditches he must dig veins and capillaries for himself. Where the water ran, cultivation was possible; where it didn't the sagebrush of the desert showed unbroken. Such cooperation forbade quarrels; one would as soon quarrel about the bloodstream.