

The Shape of the Keyhole

Denise Bergman



Black
Lawrence
Press

For Gerry

Contents

Introduction	1
Day One	3
Day Two	23
Days Three Four Five Six	33
Day Seven	43
Notes	59

In 1650 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a woman was hanged for “bewitching to death” her friend’s child.

The single, and remarkably brief, historical account includes this accusation by the child’s nurse: “She did make much of the child, and then the child was well, but quickly changed its color and dyed in a few hours.”

Almost immediately after the woman was hanged—denying her guilt to the end—it was discovered that the child died because the nurse brought him with her into the woods in the freezing cold so she could be with her secret lover.

Day One

The one in the constable's robe taps
knuckles on her door

fingers fisted white around bone,
wrist the knocker hinge

Taps his knuckles

She empties the wash bucket,
walks 'round to the front,
sees the back of the man—*yes?*

Bucket clanks, rolls to a rock

stops

He knocked he could have barged in

Yes?

Impatient

she doesn't recognize him,
expected the neighbor needed eggs

Yes? clipped,
impatient

Lye coats her hands

Yes?

His knuckles retrieve a pulse,
disappear like ancient turtles into his cuff

She has only time to fetch her cape

Autopsy, *autopsia*, “see for oneself”
blue the boy’s lips fingers toes ears nose

*The cold had stuck in the red gum, they said,
the red gum come out upon him*

Felled by ignorance, shrunken by pride,
the examiners
stopped looking for why

blamed her as their disguise

mistake
missed stake mistaken wrongly taken
not for the taking take
stakes high stakes

Between knuckles and their echo
a flash flood

dislodged sediment, fragmented scenes,
churned up voices

She had burped her friend's newborn,
cradled him, tickled him

rhymes singsongs, taught him
playful disobedience

to roll down a hill,
lure a gopher with a treenut

Flash flood presses her lungs' bellows—

to never hear, touch,
see him again—breathe!

Sudden surge then the flood recedes,
still, no turning around

She had held tight her friend's shoulders
before the baby's head crowned

lifted the placenta from the midwife's hands

suggested his name

Who is she

who is she not, that they will hoist her

before

(as she herself would say) double-checking

Who, that no one

saddles a horse,

gallops to the dead boy's mother

asks

Fear awakens fear

Slipping on a crisp of ice, stepping on a fiddlehead

Falling off the roof

Standing too tall, appearing too upright

Loving, letting loose, making mistakes unbeknownst to her

Stumbling on the street

Fear of no fear, fear of a dozen fears

Eggs in a pyramid, forgetting to cross your fingers

Being visible, invisible

Wrong place

Too late, too early

On time

Bobbing-yes heads and glares
sideways airs

*Her, her—
she killed that boy,
her*

*she
herself she did*

Told retold:

Not I

I could not would not am not
can't imagine
wielding lightning-rod
venom
on a boy's pink cheek,
unyielding power

for what—for show
or did she lose control

oh, if I had her
hidden
life-ending force

would I

Why does no one ask why

she killed a child
would want to kill
a child
that child

could she not stop herself

her demons
have outgrown their skins

Told retold:

She and the boy built a nest
lined with juniper
for a broken day-old warbler

nesting on a low branch the warbler
its eyes too young to see
in the vacant woods
in the well-tracked woods blind deaf
woods of lovers' trysts and secret
masturbations, woods of gold
coins buried under rocks covered in dead leaves
woods too distracted to notice a woman and child soothing
a bird's
trembling head
wishing it future
and flight

Told retold:

She tickled my fevered baby,
he smiled, then laughed

I called her “friend,” oh! what have I done,
what have I—
oh! they’ll call me witch

Scrub your hands, scrub away her touch,
scrub anything she touched

But what of her pie pan half-empty

Her pear tree leans over my raspberries,
they shelter in its shade,
sparrows filled with berries peck at her ripe pears,
she ate them anyway

Never complained

She planted beans in oak shade just, she said, to see

She and the boy built a small stream dam
Oh! why did she tell me

A dam stops the river’s flow

Featureless night
indistinct

not like but not unlike all others

Pail kicked by a cow
Crickets, bullfrog

A fox is shot

She fumbles for a window,
squints through the jail bars for a light

reaches for a candle, a match

stock-still listens for a voice
to answer the shouting in her head

Gropes for a wall to lean against

Prays for something
anything
familiar to appear