

Mother, Ankle Deep

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after Sherry B. Ortner's essay "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" with permission from the author

woman's consciousness—her membership, as it were, in culture—is evidenced in part by the very fact that she accepts her own devaluation and takes culture's point of view.

—Sherry B. Ortner

I.

Mother (*17 then*) / body in a river / another boy body / too / not
his fault / without scales in the water / raw denim / raw best friend
body parts / boy body parts / city grit / culture / he could be / could
have been / kicking at the river / at her skin / with his clothes on /
mother's body / nature / she tells me / a story / about the friend / the
river / his body / dead in the river / mother / river / she swallowed
him whole.

II.

Since then / yes / mother with daughters / to the river / nature / life-
risking / yes / we will / swim / make us swim / our bodies little / gills /
mouths gaping / kick at the water / fight for / breath / natural.

Sister (*only 4 then*) / ran / on two legs / on land / into the water /
without her sealskin / without her scales / against her nature / little
girl body / human body / almost a history / alive again / found /
in mother's arms / mother rocking / crying / scared, scaring, scary /
sister breathing then / and now / still / her arms / in mother's
natural arms.

III.

Once when I (*2 then*) / found unlocked / the front door / crawling /
a natural pond across the street / and the neighbors / their male
bodies / culture / houses they owned / a piano inside / and a theater
/ cultural / they found me there / and carried / in their arms / they
carried / not like mother's arms / unnatural / not soft /
me / like a sack of potatoes / like a man-made thing / a sack of / a
body / carried me / back home.

Mother then / at the door to receive me / eyes as large as ponds /
I could swim / in mother's eyes / deep and scary / natural / like a river /
a woman-made thing / water brimming / flooding / shoring up from
her mother's body.

IV.

River swallows / rubbish / coins / lures / best friend bodies / real sparkling
bobbles man-made everything / culture / below / the boy body / carried
/ the city in him / what rivers love / to pull beneath them / the bodies /
water / wrapping arms around us / nature pulling culture under / like
mother's arms / or men's arms / like a heavy sack / which one?

V.

Water's arms / around my little / girl body / rocking / leaves us / my
sister, my mother, and I / at the shore.

VI.

A woman / her body / *seen as 'merely' / closer to nature* / inherits the
river / the river / nature / a woman / scared / of boys' bodies / scared
/ culture / kicking at her surface / my mother / the river / he could
not kick through / swallowed him whole.

Mother walks into the river / doesn't know / why river's arms do not
/ carry her under / like a sack of / heavy / coins / rubbish / a lure /
man-made / a boy body / Mother's body / knows *culture / nature /
distinction / a product / of culture* / man-made / mother, ankle deep /
wades in / scared.

