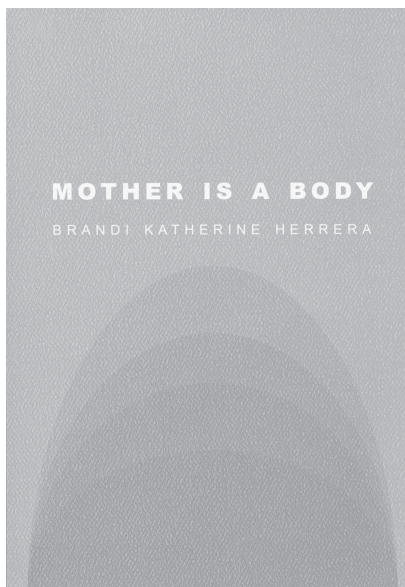


MOTHER IS A BODY

Brandi Katherine Herrera

Fonograf (\$15.95)



Brandi Katherine Herrera's *Mother Is A Body* opens with a dedication to six children who we'll meet later in the book and an accompanying comment: "You were never, but / I loved the idea." It is something we say often—I love this idea—but what does it truly mean, and what happens if the idea (perhaps a child) cannot be? What is left, then? How, exactly, do we mourn this thing that never was?

These questions and more circulate in the empty spaces of Herrera's formally inventive book-length poem. Like other Fonograf artists, Herrera's work aligns well with the publisher's mission to create a platform for "interdisciplinary, experimental, and unclassifiable" works that "resist, bend, and break expectations." In *Mother Is A Body*, Herrera borrows material excavated from sources like Instagram, Wikipedia, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture archives to create a composite of hauntings: imagined children, missing mothers, words stricken from the body of a text, a body without, a child who wasn't, a footnote. Over and over, the reader encounters new perspectives on grieving what isn't, what cannot be, what never was.

The book is divided into seven sections, the first of which, titled "she said / she said," links to a SoundCloud recording that begins with a soft *shhhhhh*. A couple seconds in, we hear dialogue—a telephone exchange between two women, that starts as a somewhat stilted superficial Q&A, but builds into something scarier. About halfway through, layered on top of the soft *shhhhhh* and the dialogue, is a static-radio voice that delivers three lines from a Clarice Lispector

story: "From the kitchen his mother checks on him: are you sitting still over there? He thinks very loudly: boy. A mother is: not dying." We are left with a layered and shaky definition of what a mother is and what a mother is not.

The poem seems to take up a concern voiced in Sheila Heti's 2018 novel *Motherhood*: "I don't want 'not a mother' to be part of who I am—for my identity to be the negative of someone else's positive identity." Herrera teases the complexity of this negation even further when, in her all-caps, typographically stunning fifth section, she writes, "WHAT IS A MOTHER BUT / ANOTHER WAY TO EMPTY / OURSELVES INTO OURSELVES." This section, titled "A BODY IS A TERRIBLE MOTHER," seethes, with text overlapping text:

HERSELF OVER AND OVER A
BABY BODY ORIGIN EGG BABY
DEPENDENT OVER AND OVER
BODY ORIGIN EGG BABY BODY
A MOTHER IS MOTHERING THE
ORIGIN EGG BABY BODY ORIGIN
BURDEN INSIDE HER HOUSE
EGG BABY BODY ORIGIN EGG
EVEN WHEN SHE'S NOT A
BABY BODY ORIGIN EGG BABY
MOTHER IS A HUNK OF MOTHER
BODY ORIGIN EGG BABY BODY
FLESH IS A BROKEN BITCH

Here, the layering of text evokes a building frustration with the failure of both words and body—a stark contrast to the next section, "Baby, I mean," where words gradually fall away. In this section, we see a series of sixteen text blocks entitled "Baby"; in each block, a word is erased from the body of the text and footnoted. As the series progresses, more words are extracted, leaving gaping holes in the text:

Baby

What is left	or	Sameness reproduces life. Of
full	full of	virtual
	its	vast as

is	free of	Language moves	The	articulates
movement. The movement petrifies the			potential to	The
potential origin				
The	single potential	flows in and out		
What is left	or	And by	I mean	

The iterative, gradual erasure of words like "body, without, self, baby, empty, egg, cannot, desire, life, what is left," beautifully performs the slow, cutting ache of loss.

So what is left when language and body fail us? Perhaps, as the Deleuze and Guattari epigraph suggests, it is a poetics of "colors and sounds, becomings and intensities," which is not nothing. From the opening dedication to the end, from the personal heartbreaks to the death of a larger symbolic feminine trope, *Mother Is A Body* artfully shows us what it means to mourn an idea with tenderness, honesty, anger, and grace.

—Alissa Hattman