

# READER'S COMPANION

*for*

## Maggie Smith's *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*

(Tupelo Press, 2015)

Winner of the Dorset Prize, selected by Kimiko Hahn

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## Biographical Note

Born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1977, Maggie Smith studied at Ohio Wesleyan University (BA, Creative Writing) and The Ohio State University (MFA, Poetry). Currently she works as a freelance writer and editor.

Maggie Smith is the author of *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison* (Tupelo Press, 2015), selected by Kimiko Hahn as the winner of the 2012 Dorset Prize; *Lamp of the Body* (Red Hen Press, 2005), winner of the Benjamin Saltman Award; and three prizewinning chapbooks: *Disasterology* (Dream Horse Press, forthcoming); *The List of Dangers* (Kent State University Press/Wick Poetry Series, 2010); and *Nesting Dolls* (Pudding House, 2005).

A 2011 recipient of a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, Smith has also received four Individual Excellence Awards from the Ohio Arts Council, two Academy of American Poets Prizes, the Emerging Writer Lectureship at Gettysburg College, and fellowships from the Sustainable Arts Foundation, the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Her poems have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and many other journals and anthologies.

For more information, visit the poet's website:  
[www.maggiesmithpoet.com](http://www.maggiesmithpoet.com)

## Commentaries on Maggie Smith's Poetry

### On *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*:

"Enchantment: that rarest of all poetic gifts. As when the neurons, in the kaleidoscopic movie they call a "functional MRI," speak to us in colors on a screen from the deepest recesses of what we already know. Maggie Smith's are poems of transformation: haunting, gorgeous, intimately unsettling. I cannot remember when I last read a book to match her powers of delight."

— **Linda Gregerson**

"Some kind of primary mythic world lies behind and throughout these adult tales of ultimate matters. Maggie Smith's skill at bringing archetypes into her own individual stories is both seamless and transforming. *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison* is as much about the terrible and beautiful dreams of children as it is about waking up as a parent. This is a rare book of poems." — **Stanley Plumly**

"Maggie Smith's collection is magical and troubling. . . . Time alternates between the forest where there are refrigerator magnets and safety belts, and The Forest where you, a now-human you, once preened 'your blue-black wings.' . . . Time stops for violence and passion. Be intrigued. Find yourself welcome."

— **Kimiko Hahn**, final judge of the Dorset Prize

"Folk tales and their eerie, animistic wisdom are a wellspring for these powerful lyrics. The poems are ethereal and dark, brimming with dread, beauty, and rapture. *The Bloody Chamber*, Angela Carter's arresting prose engagement with fairy tales, comes to mind. Smith updates motifs of the pacts children make with nature, the power of luck and curses, loss of innocence, the vulnerable and the sinister, primal fears of being eaten, and much more. The images are so fresh and inventive they shimmer. Original, cautionary, rich, delicious, *The Well Speaks . . .* is a spellbinding collection." — **Amy Gerstler**

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### On *Lamp of the Body*:

"Vivid and surprising language? Check. Sly yet taut rhythm? Check. Serious engagement with serious issues? Check. Maggie Smith's poems have the traits we look for in a good poet. But for Smith those virtues are where she begins, not where she ends. Smith's intelligence shines in every word, every rhythmic pulse, every engagement of this masterly first book. In "The Poem Speaks to Desperation," Smith offers a compelling ars poetica: "I inhabit you, a nest of bees/in your mouth. You cannot / swallow without waking them. . . . / I have the last word. / On the tip of a tongue, / suddenly, I am what swarms." It's a big claim. The poems live up to it. Check." — **Andrew Hudgins**

“Here in Maggie Smith’s first book we encounter a voice that is spare, confident, and precise. Her images click into place, and the movement of each poem is deft, muscular, taut. These are poems we trust, poems that ask hard questions while at the same time convincing us of the magic in the world. Smith’s voice is reserved, yet she carries her world forward in her teeth, so to speak. There’s wisdom and acceptance in many of the poems, coupled with a willingness to utter what she does not understand, a recognition ‘that worse happens to better than I.’ She embraces the mystery. There’s a kinship with the Ohio landscape, but also the recognition that ‘darkness ploughs its furrows here.’ These are poems that do not flinch in the face of grief while at the same time they do not give into formulas that either comfort or accuse. I admire the courage and the control, the gorgeous turns, the leaps she takes in the poems while keeping the center of each poem intact. These are poems that do not wobble; the voice is confident and secure, the authority claimed, and the darkness met head on—“mealy, and bitter”—but as she writes in ‘The Poem Speaks to Danger’: ‘I am the mouth / that can hold more . . . the globe // of some new, ready fruit.’ This is a book that delights, intrigues, and instructs. A wonderful debut.” — **Carol Potter**, final judge of the Benjamin Saltman Award

“In *Lamp of the Body*, Maggie Smith illuminates nothing less than the opportunities for and the possibilities of poetic utterance. Her themes—landscape, loss, and western myth—are richly classic; her language, sensuous and elegant. Primitive and visionary, exacting and unrestrained, these poems are in possession of a good strangeness, an awful nostalgia that irrevocably transforms the now.” — **Kathy Fagan**

“These spare, deft lyrics excavate a lost world and recuperate that world with unremitting clarity. In ‘The Poem Speaks to Memory,’ Smith addresses ‘the bald light bulb / swinging over the past’ and declares ‘No one / rows to the island of his // childhood without rowing / through you.’ From Bible stories, dreams, myths, and family album, Smith’s characters emerge: ‘Hear No Evil is still // a schoolgirl, her neat bangs cut / straight across. Speak No Evil / is alive, her cigarette burning // down in the ashtray.’ A sharp metaphysician, Smith’s narrator also addresses abstractions such as ‘Doubt’ and ‘Progress’—and astonishes with her cunning use of personification. I admire Smith’s handling of anaphora and syntactical repetition, her shapely stanzas, her beautifully configured line turns. When the speaker asks, ‘What was I made of?’ (‘In the Beginning’) readers will appreciate, poem after poem, Smith’s piercing reply.” — **Robin Becker**, final judge of the Benjamin Saltman Award

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### **On *The List of Dangers*:**

“Tight and purposeful as a fable, *The List of Dangers* gives us sorrows and warnings from a world imbalanced by beasts and little beauties. The images are precise as a child’s playroom—keyholes, miniature candelabra, the ‘treble notes’ of wrens and gypsies—but perilous in their tender transformations. Maggie

Smith's rich lyric gifts produce here a poetry of balancing composure in the face of peril and pretty chance." — **David Baker**

"In Maggie Smith's *The List of Dangers*, as in the Brothers Grimm, we learn early how hazardous life is and how eagerly our fate awaits us. In these inventive new poems, Smith borrows elements from folktales, fairy tales, and fables to remind us once again that 'Nothing stays good for long' and 'No one [is] preserved.' And just as before, we're thrilled by each tale and tickled to death at our own imperilment." — **Kathy Fagan**

## Wise and Fierce Beauty: Maggie Smith's *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*

Adapted from an interview with Jessamyn Smyth, *Tupelo Quarterly* ([www.tupeloquarterly.com/wise-fierce-beauty](http://www.tupeloquarterly.com/wise-fierce-beauty))

When I encountered Maggie Smith's poetry manuscript *The Well Speaks of its Own Poison*, I knew immediately that I was in the presence of the real thing. There is wise, fierce, and truthful beauty here, the muscular craft to carry it across time and place, and both the risks and stakes required to engage the reader at a level that matters. It's not pretty, it's beauty. It's writing we need.

*The Well* . . . also draws on thematic obsessions: fairy and folk tales, animal archetypes, shapeshifting, vigilance, protection of the beloveds (and inevitable failures to protect), music and the lack of it, and much else that resonated at the level of bone and blood, which is where these poems live.

I had the opportunity to have an email exchange with Smith about these themes, the book, and the writing life, and am delighted to be able to share that conversation in this launch issue of TQ, as well as four previously unpublished poems from her manuscript. — Jessamyn Smyth

**Jessamyn Smyth (JJS):** This summer, stalking the Montague Book Mill for sustenance with my familiar at my side, I found an almost-complete set of the Andrew Lang Fairy Books and fell on it, slavering. . . . I gloated all the way home, basking in the bloody glow coming from the heavy paper bag. The Lang books interest me particularly because they capture a threshold-moment in our inheritance of these stories: in these turn-of-the-century versions, published between 1889 and 1910, we have clear trace of entirely unsanitized origins, and glimmers of the Disneyfication to come. Even as Lang himself objected to any domestication of the original tales, his framing of them as stories for Victorian children stuck: these iterations of "The Tinder Box," "The Enchanted Deer," "The Snow Queen" stand as culture-markers—and last examples, for some time to come, of mass acceptance of our visceral need for visceral stories that do not neatly resolve the hazards and grotesqueries of our lives.

*The Well Speaks of its Own Poison* uses the archetypes of fairy tales with the same kind of visceral power the original stories do, and does so with the same kind of cultural-moment-clarity we can see so clearly in Lang: the poems create a temporal and contextual fusion so that even as they are unfolding on a suburban *cul de sac* and a bike's banana seat, they are also the glass mountain, the trackless wood, the gingerbread house.

In recent decades, genre writers have taken back the fairy tale (Angela Carter, most famously, turned that burning boat around), but it seems to me there is still sometimes discomfort with them in literary and poetic work: [although] all of us mine archetypes, we seem to like to pretend that we don't, and accuse others of being heavy-handed or taking short cuts when they do so very directly.

Your poems are so . . . strong in craft at the levels of language, line, image, that I don't think even a Literary Arbiter of Very Tidy Spirit *could* accuse you of whatever the particular gripes of the moment are against use of fairy tale, myth, archetype. . . . [As] catharsis must do: these poems make their own utility unarguable, even as they slide in past all defenses on a wave of beauty and skill.

But . . . what enabled you to go so very directly, effectively, and beautifully into the heart of these familiar woods, bringing the reader through the . . . kind of catharsis the original stories provided, even as what you're doing is entirely contemporary?

**Maggie Smith (MS):** I'm not sure it was bravery that allowed me to plunge headfirst into writing these poems and, ultimately, this book. I must admit, it never occurred to me that this material—fairy tale, myth, archetype—would be off limits. After all, if we all sat around thinking about what people would say before picking up a pen or paintbrush or whatever the tool may be, we might not make anything at all—and whatever we did end up making would be inherently timid. Thinking too much can make your work dangerously small, can't it? (I starting typing “world” rather than “work” there, which would have been a typo, and yet I think there's truth to it.)

I started writing *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison* without knowing I was writing a book about fairy tales. It began when I was working as a copywriter, reading books for children and young adults and crafting catalog copy about each book. One of the books that came across my desk that year was *Tales Our Abuelitas Told: A Hispanic Folktale Collection* by Alma Flor Ada and F. Isabel Campoy, and I was really taken by the turns of phrase, the imagery, and the differences in plot, character, and narrative style as compared to the Eastern European tales I grew up reading (and the Disneyfied versions I grew up watching). So I wrote the first Apologue . . . and then another . . . and then another. Eventually I decided to revisit some of the tales from my childhood, so I dove into the Grimms', and there was no going back. I spent the next couple of years immersed in that world.

One of the strangest shifts in the writing of this book was that I started out focusing on the girls of these tales—these lost girls, swallowed girls, abandoned girls, girls in unthinkable danger—and then I had a daughter of my own, and all of the love and the fierce protective instincts fed a fire I had already been tending through these poems. Finally I knew firsthand that feeling of being desperate—but ultimately unable—to protect your child, not only from the real danger in the world but also from the knowledge of danger. How can we possibly keep our children from the brutality of the world they live in—the world we brought them to—without keeping them from all the wonder and beauty in it, too? We can't have it both ways. And these poems, I think, are full of that tension.

**JJS:** In the titular poem “The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison,” you masterfully summon—through evocation of betrayal—the profound *we*, the private *I*, and the archetypal *us*:

*. . . to warn the water-witchers*

*against divining here, I taught myself to speak. You know  
what they say about poisoning a well: Soon it seeps.*

In the opening poem “Vanishing Point,” we meet a girl who

*. . . measures her distance  
in lines: a sonnet for every fourteen steps down  
a long hall of yellow leaves. They smell as bitter as aspirin.*

Later, she is

*Swallowed whole by trees, eaten alive in a manner  
of speaking, she walks toward a point none of us can see.  
It is blacker there than in the gut. From far off, her life  
rings like a thrown voice. Let it not be a fable for others.*

In “Seven Disappointments (2),” the poem opens: “You are human again, but you remember/both lives.”

For me personally . . . these kinds of visceral lines that move us seamlessly back and forth between the primal *we/I/us* and the animal/human worlds are the whole point of . . . art. . . . Poems as psychopomps carrying us between the land of the living and the dead: poems as crossroads: poems as theriomorphic experience: poems as transformation of the daily into the archetypal: poems as lifeline and tenderness for those we wish we could protect: poems as refusal to lie about how easy it will be.

What enables this kind of shamanic presence and courage in your work?

**MS:** The human world and animal world collide with such mixed results in fables and fairy tales. There are beasts that eat children, children who become birds, creatures that aid children in escaping evil adults, predatory animals that dress as trusted adults, and the list goes on and on. It is never clear whom to trust—and, while portrayed more dramatically in fairy tales, this is the way the world works. So for me the daily and archetypal dovetailed pretty naturally. Also, though, I worried about the book becoming monotonous. I felt strongly that some of the poems should be set in the present to add a little more texture to the collection. And then there are poems like “The List of Dangers” and “Shapeshifter” that help to bridge the gap between the present-day, more semi-autobiographical poems and the more traditional fairy tale poems.

**JJS:** People often talk about the music inherent in poetry. Your language is rich with it. What struck me . . . was your willingness to go so directly at the experience of being without it, or being with it when it is not beautiful; an existential realism as gritty as the oldest fairy tale.

In “The Shepherd’s Horn, we get these lines:



*. . . Listen, murderer.  
No one said the music is beautiful.*

*. . .  
What did you expect? The truth is not  
melodic, not something to dance to.*

In “Seven Disappointments (1),” these are the final lines:

*. . . she cuts off  
her finger and turns it inside the keyhole.  
Not everything can be set to music.*

In “Lanterns,” of the banished dead we learn:

*The stories say that you can hear them.  
That they sing by the lanterns of skinned rabbits.  
That the music is what coats the grass with frost.*

What allows you to access this realism without flinching, and to stay out of your own way when there might be an impulse to soften or sanitize it?

**MS:** “Not everything can be set to music” was a really important idea to me in this book. Going back to those Disneyfied versions of fairy tales, there is always sweet music that swells and lets you know that everything is going to be all right. It’s not so different from the horror movie music (or terrifying silence) that clues you in to the slasher hiding right around the corner. But life doesn’t provide a tidy soundtrack to let us know what might happen next, or to let us know we’re safe. In fact, sometimes the cues it gives us are dead wrong.

For me, staying out of my own way often means resisting the urge to micromanage a poem. If I find myself over-revising—tying up every loose end, scrubbing out ambiguity—I need to have the sense to let go and trust the poem. You can revise the life right out of a poem if you’re not careful. In this book I made a conscious effort to loosen my grip on the poems, and I think the strangeness and darkness is a direct result.

**JJS:** The realism, the visceral truthfulness I’ve been ruminating on in these questions—this all sounds very heavy and dark. And while in some moments the work is [dark], the overall experience of the book is for me quite the opposite: because it is truthful, it effects catharsis, it anneals, it gives relief and light. The final experience of it is deeply kind as lies cannot ever be.

Damn, I love this book.

**MS:** What else can I say to this but damn, thank you!

## Review by Diana Whitney from *The Rumpus*

([therumpus.net/2015/05/the-well-speaks-of-its-own-poison-by-maggie-smith/](http://therumpus.net/2015/05/the-well-speaks-of-its-own-poison-by-maggie-smith/))

Maggie Smith's second full-length collection is both a warning and an enchantment. Drawn from the Brothers Grimm and Hispanic folktales, the ominous, magical poems in *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison* inhabit the dark forests of fairytale as well as suburban neighborhoods where "The kids / named the cul-de-sacs."

The book's opening poem beckons us off the forest path, following a girl who "does not know / wickedness when she sees it" into a dangerous, mythic landscape. Luckily, the poem's speaker is far wiser than its heroine, aware of every old fable the girl may be reliving: "What is she doing alone? / Gathering nosegays? Using her mother's disregard / to hack through the brambles?" With spare, haunting imagery, the speaker warns us how easily the self can disappear, can be consumed:

*The girl is lost, not hunted. Taken, but not into a hot,  
dark mouth. Nothing lurks in the fir's blue pins.  
Swallowed whole by trees, eaten alive in a manner  
of speaking, she walks toward a point none of us can see.  
It is blacker there than in the gut. From far off, her life  
rings like a thrown voice. Let it not be a fable for others.*

from "Vanishing Point"

And so the reader is warned—and captivated. Smith's lyrical voice is precise, never pretentious, in its magical realism. She is what Clarissa Pinkola Estés calls a "cantadora, a keeper of the old stories," in the 1990s feminist book of myths, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. Dr. Estés unfolds intercultural tales that restore women's creative vitality by "dig[ging] into the ruins of the female underworld," exploring the archetype of the Wild Woman, the instinctive psyche. Smith delves into this underworld as well, but in her gorgeous and terrible dreamscapes, the psyche is always in peril:

*No one is out of danger.  
Darkness threads a needle as fast as light. As the devil eats,  
bones pile under the table. Bread cries out in the oven  
for fear of burning. A heart nestles among red apples.*

from "Village Smart"

These poems are studded with images we recognize from fairytales, offering iconic color in the forest gloom: wolves, foxes, deer, skinned rabbits, apples, hearts, white bones. Through Smith's imaginative leaps, a kind of sorcery occurs, the lines shape-shifting quickly and musically: "Even a fox with blood on its muzzle / can wish on red clover and be a girl again" ("Apologue (3)").

Shape-shifting and transformation heighten in the eight “Apologues,” fantastical poems that originate, Smith tells us in a note, from *Tales Our Abuelitas Told: A Hispanic Folktale Collection*. Always spoken in the second person singular, the Apologues create a strange intimacy with the reader:

*Little Twig Snapping*

*Under the Devil's Shoe, for every crow's heart you swallow  
whole, you are promised a gold piece under your tongue.  
Now coins fall from your lips when you speak, chiming  
around you, but they might as well be pebbles. The pearls  
you weep might as well be tears.*

*from “Apologue (5)”*

The Apologues are the most lush, wild, and lyrical poems in *The Well Speaks of its Own Poison*, balancing the stark horror of the other fairytale world, where humans are hunted without mercy:

*Gaunt and salt-and-pepper as the birches, the wolves  
are starving in these woods. From here the moon  
is a crystal ball. I don't need to look inside  
to tell you that if you walk into the trees,  
you won't come out.*

*from “The Fortune Teller to the Woodsman”*

This poem is saved from brutality by the sheer beauty of its violence, something stunning and redemptive in the hunger:

*If the moon says  
you'll be picked clean, believe her. You'll feed  
whatever hunts you the heart hot from your body.*

Many voices issue warnings in *The Well Speaks of its Own Poison*: not only the Fortune Teller to the Woodsman, but mother to child, sister to sister, even “the robotic voice of a school bus” depositing children on the sidewalk, and the stone well of the title, poisoned by envy, which cautions “Who drinks of me / now will be a tiger, then a wolf, then a roebuck.” In a world where a girl's hands may be severed, the ability to speak is of utmost importance, generating power and integrity. Women, especially, must tell their stories. So warns the vigilant mother in “If I Forget to Tell You”: “Daughter, / where silence is permitted to grow, it grows.”

*The Well Speaks of its Own Poison* renders a tapestry of stories, fables, and parables, and in the process explores the act of story-telling and revision. In “Unclassified Stars,” Smith's incestuous re-telling of Hansel and Gretel, the Grimms' original version transforms into an experience of self-discovery and sensual awakening, a secret love story. Written in five sections, the prose poem keeps switching details, changing scenes, reinventing itself until the final stanza, narrated by Gretel:

*Ultimately, all revisions of her life collapse into one: the sharpening sea, the candied eaves of the cottage, Hansel's salty fingers in her mouth. At the end of the story, where the moral should be, there are only two nudes reclining, naked and flushed beneath a great oak. Babes in the wood. Who's to say where one ends and the other begins? Where the body forgets its edges. Where the story drops off and calls itself memory, life. Who's to say? They have been rolling so long in the leaves, their two skins smell exactly the same.*

*from "Unclassified Stars"*

At the end of this collection, where the moral should be, we are left with impressions of great beauty and great danger, a passionate waking dream.

Diana Whitney's first book of poetry, *Wanting It* (Harbor Mountain Press, 2014), was a small-press bestseller. Her essays have appeared in *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington Post*, *Numero Cinq*, *Dartmouth Alumni Review*, and other publications. A yoga teacher by trade, she blogs about motherhood and sexuality for *The Huffington Post* and runs Core Flow Yoga in Brattleboro, Vermont.

## Author's Commentary and Discussion Questions

Here are my thoughts on some of the poems in *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*. I'm wary of "closing" the poems by saying too much here, so I hope this brief commentary will instead provide an opening. I've addressed some specific poems and some in groups.

### "Vanishing Point"

The book opens with "Vanishing Point," which is a kind of re-envisioning of the Brothers Grimm story "Little Red Cap" (also commonly known as "Little Red Riding Hood"). In thinking about "Little Red Cap" and other tales, I started to wonder aloud about some of the plot points. Who lets a young girl travel in the woods alone? What does a mother expect to come of that? In this poem, the "mother's disregard" is something the child carries with her. It's something the mother gave her, however unwittingly, but it's of no use. Disregard is not a tool or a weapon she can use to "hack through the brambles" or to protect herself.

Ultimately in this re-envisioning of the tale, there is no wolf: "The girl is lost, not hunted." A reader might consider this a tamer version, as it's missing the classic villain, but I see the banal reality of it as more terrifying. Some children leave home and never return. This happens in our world, not just the world of fairytale. As an opening to the book, "Vanishing Point" introduces the reader to these dangers and to the role of the poems as warnings or admonishments.

1. How would you describe the speaker's tone in this poem?
2. How does the epigraph to the first section, from Brigit Pegeen Kelly, inform this poem? ("Child. We are done for / in the most remarkable ways.")

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### The Apologues

There is a series of eight poems in the book, each titled "Apologue." These fables were inspired by traditional Latin American folktales I came across in *Tales Our Abuelitas Told: A Hispanic Folktale Collection* by F. Isabel Campoy and Alma Flor Ada (Atheneum, 2006). I read the book and was taken by the turns of phrase, the imagery, and the traditional terms of endearment used to address the reader directly.

Instead of "Once upon a time" and "They lived happily ever after," traditional Latin American tales have quirky opening and closing lines, some of which read as non-sequiturs. In each of the Apologues, the Spanish epigraph is a common opening line for a traditional folktale, and the first line of the poem is this epigraph translated into English. The final italicized line of each poem is an English translation of a common closing line.

The poems, it seems to me, have an internal logic but are not linear. “Wondering around,” a phrase from Apologue (1), is what these poems do. It’s as if the speaker is finding the words as she delivers them. Each poem is a pastiche of images from the original tales, pieces from imagination, memory, even other fairy tales. I think the language of fable gives the poems a timeless quality and a storyteller’s authority we inherently trust.

1. Look at the references to eyes and seeing in Apologue 6 and “Game.” What is the role of witnessing in the book?
2. A line from Apologue (2) (“Her voice carried, so in a way she was many / places at once.”) echoes the “thrown voice” referenced in “Vanishing Point.” How are the acts of speaking out and truth telling important in the book?
3. How does the speaker in the Apologues compare to speakers in other poems? Is the oral tradition apparent in these poems, and if so, how?

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### **“The List of Dangers”**

The trigger for this poem was thinking about the things we do to protect our children. When I was a child, my family lived across the street from my elementary school, but my parents learned that I would be bused to an inner-city school across town for first grade, as the city attempted to effectively desegregate the schools. My parents chose to move us to the suburbs instead. The term for the larger trend here is “white flight,” which shows up in the poem as the three daughters in the poem see the “corridor of blossoming pear trees” in their new neighborhood. I also began thinking about the difference between danger and the perception of danger, and how both can have a real and lasting impact on one’s life.

When I was working on the poems for this book, I also began developing an interest in heirloom fruit, and apples in particular. (It’s fitting, since apples tend to play a role in so many fairy tales, most notably “Snow White.”) I was—and still am—fascinated by the idea that the average apple I buy at the supermarket in the twenty-first century doesn’t taste like an apple someone ate in the nineteenth century. As it turns out, an apple is not an apple is not an apple. I was/am also intrigued by the idea that heirloom varieties preserve a part of the past that can then be experienced in a contemporary context.

But is a nineteenth century apple variety inherently changed, even tainted, by the fact that it’s being eaten in the twenty-first century? Ultimately the poem looks at the ways we romanticize and oversimplify the past: “No one was preserved, / an heirloom apple. Not even the three daughters / would taste exactly as girls did hundreds of years ago.”

1. What is the role of the epigraph in the poem?
2. Heirloom apples appear elsewhere, in other poems. What is the role of apples in individual poems? What do they symbolize collectively?

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### **“Seven Disappointments (1)” & “Seven Disappointments (2)”**

This pair of poems is based on “The Seven Ravens,” a Brothers Grimm tale. The tale is about a couple with seven sons, but all they long for is a daughter. When their eighth child is born, a girl, she is not well, so the father sends the sons to a well to fetch water for an emergency baptism. The sons drop the bucket into the well and are terrified to go home and tell their father. When they don't return home, the father curses them and turns them into ravens. The daughter is raised without any mention of her brothers, but eventually she learns of their existence and goes searching for them.

Ultimately these poems are about sacrifice, family, and the danger of secrets. The first poem sets up the story, focusing on the girl. The speaker is a plainspoken realist: “You might want to look away. She cuts off / her finger and turns it inside the keyhole. / Not everything can be set to music.”

The second poem focuses on the brothers' experience, from humans to birds to humans once again. The theme of shape shifting and transformation carries on throughout the book, in the Apologues, the title poem, and in more autobiographical poems like “Shapeshifter.”

1. The last line of “Seven Disappointments (1)” is “Not everything can be set to music.” What does this mean in the context of this poem? What about in the context of the book as a whole?
2. The speaker in “Seven Disappointments (1)” says to the reader, “You might want to look away.” The speaker in “Apologue (1),” says, “I know you want to forget that last part.” Many of the poems have speakers who are intimate with the reader. How does this intimacy affect your experience of the poems?

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### **“Unclassified Stars” and Poems as Re-Visions**

This prose poem is a re-envisioning of Hansel and Gretel. It's also the oldest poem in the book, written more than fifteen years ago. (Alberto Rios selected it as the winner of *Mid-American Review's* 2001 Fineline Competition for prose poems and short-shorts.) One of my favorite books when I was young was *Dean's A Book of Fairy Tales*. I loved the illustrations in particular, by Janet and Anne Grahame Johnstone, and had in my mind images from “Hansel and Gretel” and

“Babes in the Wood.”

In each stanza (paragraph), more is revealed to be false. The speaker tells us the truth about the story by revealing the lies in the “original version,” the version for children. It’s as if the white space on the page is the space in which the speaker considers what the audience can handle, what it should be privy to.

I’m thinking in particular of Anne Sexton’s wonderfully dark and witty book *Transformations*. I see those poems as inspired retellings, but not reimaginings. I was more interested in a re-envisioning of the tale, taking the characters and some of the narrative scaffolding, but intentionally rejecting much of the original and filling in completely new—and strange—details.

1. What other poems in the book deal with lies, misconceptions, or versions of the truth? Why is telling the (sometimes unkind, unappealing) truth important to this book and to poetry in general?

2. How does the mood change as the poem progresses?

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### “The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison”

The title poem is loosely based on the tale “Brother and Sister” by the Brothers Grimm. Instead of considering the perspective of one of the human characters in the story, I chose to write in the voice of the poisoned well. (In the story, brooks are poisoned, not a well, so I took some liberties.)

The stepmother in the original tale—known in the poem as “the woman who cannot stand another’s happiness”—is the guilty party, the one who poisons, but she makes “an accessory” of the well. The well teaches itself to speak in order to warn anyone who might drink from it.

*I will not be judged. I've done what I can. To stop the thirsty  
from hauling up my bucket, to warn the water-witchers*

*against divining here, I taught myself to speak. You know  
what they say about poisoning a well: Soon it seeps.*

Ultimately this is a poem of self-disclosure. The metaphor here is one of recognizing and owning the ways in which we are damaged—the parts of us that can be toxic—and taking responsibility.

1. What do we know about the speaker of this persona poem?

2. Why is the title of this poem the title of the book? Is it an effective title for the whole collection? Why or why not?

\*



## Poems About Mothers and Children

In the second section of the book, there is a run of poems about motherhood. When I began writing the poems that would become *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*, I was writing about imagined children—children I did not yet have. Becoming a mother, first in 2008 and again in 2012, provided me with plenty of material for later poems.

“Shapeshifter” was born out of listening to my daughter in her crib, peeping back at the birds she could hear outside, and also out of the idea that when children are very young, they change so quickly it seems supernatural. Sometimes they wake from a two-hour nap and look a little different, a little older, than they did when you tucked them in.

“Fundevogel” was inspired by my many walks through Schiller Park in the historic German Village neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio. I’d wear my infant daughter on my chest in the baby carrier and act as a sort of tour guide for her, narrating our walk, pointing out everything we passed, tulip poplars included. I remember feeling this odd sense of invincibility when the two of us were so literally and physically connected, as if nothing could harm us.

“If I Forget to Tell You” offers some harsh advice to a daughter. “The Dark” attempts to comfort a child who’s afraid by essentially domesticating darkness. “Which Song, Which Cricket” explores losing one’s individual self to motherhood.

1. How would you describe the book’s organization, and the concentration of mother/child poems toward the end?
2. “The Dark” is a poem that attempts to comfort a child. Are there other poems that seek to provide comfort in the book, or is this the one example?

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### “I Think of You, Eréndira”

This poem uses as its raw material a short story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, “Innocent Eréndira,” which I first read in college, and which obviously stuck with me. I gave myself a challenge with this poem: use the same materials, or ingredients, in each stanza, but shift and transform the way they are used. So each stanza uses the same ingredients: love, blue glass, an orange, a diamond, a cricket, and lit trees.

The epigraph to the second section is from Mark Stand: “and you will fall into another darkness, one you will find / yourself making and remaking until it is perfect.” I played with many ways to exit this book. I wondered a lot about what note the book should end on. I landed on this poem, and on the darkness at the end of it. The book opens with a poem about vanishing, and so it felt right for the book to close with a kind of vanishing.

1. How would you characterize darkness in this poem and in others (“the Dark,” etc)?
2. How would you describe the mood at the end of this poem and, in turn, at the end of the book?

## Literary Allusions in the Poems\*

**Vanishing Point:** “Little Red Cap” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The “story in which / she has a deer for a brother and braids him a leash /out of flowers” is a reference to “Brother and Sister” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

**Apologues:** The “Apologues” owe a debt to *Tales Our Abuelitas Told: A Hispanic Folktale Collection* by F. Isabel Campoy and Alma Flor Ada (Atheneum, 2006).

**The List of Dangers:** “The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

**Seven Disappointments (1) and (2):** “The Seven Ravens” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

**Village Smart:** “Mother Holle” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

**Song of the Heirloom Apple Tree:** This poem was inspired by “The Song of the Barren Orange Tree” by Federico García Lorca, translated by W. S. Merwin.

**Unclassified Stars:** “Hansel and Gretel” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

**Disenchantment:** “The Grandmother’s Tale” (traditional).

**The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison:** “Brother and Sister” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

**First Son:** “The Twelve Brothers” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

**The Shepherd’s Horn:** “The Singing Bone” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

**If I Forget to Tell You:** “The Girl Without Hands” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

**Which Song, Which Cricket:** *Crickets and Frogs: A Fable* by Gabriela Mistral (Atheneum, 1972).

**Fundevogel:** “Fundevogel” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

**I Think of You, Eréndira:** *Innocent Eréndira and Other Stories* by Gabriel García Márquez (Perennial, 1979).

\*This is by no means an exhaustive list, as many of the poems draw upon multiple sources, literary and otherwise. All references to tales by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm are from *The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales* (Pantheon, 2006).

## Writing Exercises

1. "The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison" is a persona poem in which an inanimate object confesses. Choose an inanimate object for your own persona poem.
2. Choose a fairy tale and write a re-vision. For examples beyond *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*, you might look at Anne Sexton's *Transformations*.
3. Using "Unclassified Stars" as a model, write a poem in prose or verse that tells the truth about an event or relationship by gradually exposing lies or misconceptions.
4. "Seven Disappointments (1)" and "Seven Disappointments (2)" explore two different sides of one story. Write a pair of companion poems or a longer, two-sectioned poem in which a story or event is explored from two different angles.
5. Using "I Think of You, Erendira" as a model, choose six ingredients for a poem, and write a three-stanza poem that uses the same ingredients in new ways in each stanza.
6. The Apologues borrow their first and last lines from other texts. Write a poem in which the first and last lines are borrowed, either from the same text or two different sources. You may later choose to revise out the borrowed material.
7. Riffing off of "If I Forget to Tell You," write a poem of warning or advice. The subject does not have to be a child; your speaker could warn or advise a friend, a sibling, a parent, or even a stranger.

## Web Links

**The poet's own website:**

<http://maggiesmithpoet.com/>

**Web page for Maggie Smith's book on the Tupelo Press site:**

<https://www.tupelopress.org/authors/msmith>

**Interview with Jessamyn Smyth in *Tupelo Quarterly*:**

<http://www.tupeloquarterly.com/wise-fierce-beauty-maggie-smiths-the-well-speaks-of-its-own-poison-by-jessamyn-smyth/>

**Review by Diana Whitney from *The Rumpus***

[therumpus.net/2015/05/the-well-speaks-of-its-own-poison-by-maggie-smith/](http://therumpus.net/2015/05/the-well-speaks-of-its-own-poison-by-maggie-smith/)

**Interview with Jackie Mantey in *Columbus Alive*, also featured on the Poetry Foundation blog:**

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/12/sometimes-a-poem-like-any-other-machine-breaks-or-sputters-or-has-a-whiny-wheel-an-interview-with-maggie-smith/>