



# PRISM

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PROVOST'S PRIZE WINNER  
REMAINS OF THE FAMILY  
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POETRY

**I**t's easy to reconstruct my mother's  
guilt-tipped grief as she failed to  
conceive.

I can create an imitation scene of sorrow,  
complete with her tears, absorbed and  
stored throughout my childhood to furnish  
these borrowed memories.

I feel her straining to give life to me, a child  
who refused to enter the world through her  
womb.

Unable to satisfy the aching of a uterus  
contracting around its emptiness, she  
patches me into her flesh.

Before I formed you in the womb I knew  
you, before you were born I set you apart,  
she recites.

God made you for me.

She intones this in a low voice on first days  
of school, on the anniversary of the day  
they brought me home and after letdowns  
and sad stories.

There is a painful parallel between my two  
mothers that I cannot un-see.

One sabotaged her maternal mold when  
she made a husband of infertility. The  
other ruined before innocence could ripen

with maturity.

Before I formed you in the womb I knew You.  
I've heard resignation's refrain: The Lord, he  
works in the most mysterious of ways.

Did God orchestrate teenage sex, forceful and  
confused in the silence of a late December  
night, or fabricate the child molestation charge  
that clawed me from one mother's arms and  
fed me to another's wanting embrace?

Maybe it's best to say He makes what He can  
of our mistakes.

There remains a broken path I cannot follow.  
Strange names my denaturalized ears cannot  
swallow. Osaffer and Toffic, barely discernible  
in my fifteen-year-old mother's curled and  
dyslexic print.

One of them raped her, though she doesn't  
know to call it that. One of them she thought  
she loved. One is my father. Both left before  
she knew of me. It is a broken path.

I cannot follow.

I never thought I would get pregnant. I was  
only fourteen years old. Though her penciled  
cursive betrays naiveté, I understand exactly  
what she means.

A world lies between me and my would-be

parents. Whether my Pakistani father returned to a melting land of smeared kohl, musky scent and music that saunters through the soul, or lived inside the twenty some miles that have separated my one time mother and myself, I feel they exist in separate planes, though I've rubbed shoulders with their shadows.

A sixth-grade classmate's mother cried when she recognized me from photos her best friend treasured of the daughter she surrendered.

The next day the girl tried to lure me to the car. Come meet your sister, she begged. The new baby followed two half-brothers I had seen in photos sent in care of CSD.

At my refusal came the truth: There's someone who wants to meet you... it's your mom. I hated her for thrusting lies on me with three words I knew were wrong. I hid in the dark cement hall between locker room and gym while they searched for me. Through a back door and pouring rain, a payphone brought Mom, frantic, to rescue me.

Now I see vague outlines everywhere. An older woman with marbled hair smiles as I pass.

Was it she who found her foster daughter was pregnant with me?

Is the haggard face pumping gas the one labeled "uncle" in the scrapbook child services sent?

These fringe people form the blurred edges of a puzzle I don't want to complete.

I can count on one hand the people I like to hug. What could I feel toward this woman who thinks she knows the twisted lines my soul follows through my body (and might be right) though to me she is as foreign as another sex, culture or race? The strangest stranger I could meet, how would I cringe to recognize myself in her face?

I've never known the longing pain of adopted children who grieve the mothers they could not keep.

I have been grafted onto another familial tree. Though my branches clutch cones while theirs bear fruit, there is no sorrow in my harvest.

Something of that early separation has made me a family unto myself.