

Kim Echlin / excerpt from DAGMAR'S
DAUGHTER (work-in-progress)

THE BIRTH OF PARIS

Dogs ate the mess of blood and afterbirth. Stained the greenhouse floor with their wet tongues. Only someone ornery and old as Dagmar could labour like that. When it was time to give birth, she walked slowly down the path from the house to the greenhouse and went into the back where the seedlings were. She bent over double each time a pain came and buried her face in the rows of force bulbs tasting grit and sweat. She held onto a clay pot so hard it burst and nicked her hands and when there was no space between the pains she pushed her heels into the floor as if they had roots of their own. She saw the plants open and leaves droop as she pushed. After six hours she was afraid she wouldn't make it, that this time she'd die. Soon after, the hard labour began. Her other births weren't like this one. She was stuck inside an old body and she was afraid her baby was suffocating, afraid her body might give out and die. She pushed and screamed and hung in the pain and when she could rest she urged herself and sharpened her desire. Finally, almost unconscious, she hooked the chin, grasped the hard wetness of a new world, blood and mess everywhere. One last push to get the baby out screaming, "Gaaaahd," like a holy beatitude. Through the dirty glass panes of the greenhouse the clouds suddenly changed as she pulled out the shoulders and legs and slid the baby up along the length of her to her breasts all covered with muck. Resting a moment she wrapped her inside her wide open green robe. The dogs skulked around the edges. She snipped the cord with a pair of greenhouse shears pushed out the rest of the birth easy now light and flat and slippery as a bit of water weed and dropped it on the floor for the dogs.

She wiped and wrapped her newborn daughter, listened to her breath, examined jubilant her tom-tiddler toes. She checked her colour and felt for her tiny heartbeat and when it was clear that the child was whole and breathing well she sank back into an old lawn chair. The little girl's eyes were wide open from the beginning and she never cried all that first night. When her tiny lips found Dagmar's breast she guided in the thick nipple and the baby right away pulled down milk all the while the light of those eyes twisted into her mother's, two sets of stars fixed in the same constellation. After she drank Dagmar swaddled her firmly in a soft receiving blanket, and gingerly dabbed between her own swollen legs.

Outside, steps approached along the gravel path, the door opened and Dagmar's mother, Norea, shuffled in wearing her bedroom slippers. She croaked from far away in her dry middle-of-the-night voice, "Dagmar?"

"By the seeds, back here. I've got her. She came."

"Woman-worthy!" Norea cried out scuffling toward the potting tables, "I told you not to do it alone. You never listen! How long have you been at this?" She dropped her old terry robe off her shoulders and bird legs poking from under her flimsy night dress she wrapped up her daughter and her new granddaughter as best she could and bent her head over the baby's face in the dawn moonlight.

"She looks like you," said Dagmar.

Norea wrinkled up pleased, "Yes, two squashed heads. Don't be fooled, the black hen lays a white egg."

She wiped away a few tears on her cheeks but not before one fell and stained the child's forehead. There is a mark at the girl's hairline like a little crown. It looks like a birthmark but it isn't. It wasn't there until Norea cried that night. The loose flesh hung from under the old woman's arms and knots of blue veins stood out like pebbles on her calves. A granddaughter! She sat on the edge of Dagmar's chair and rubbed her neck and caressed the baby. Dagmar leaned on her like a child and the three of them coiled around and through each other like harmless garter snakes.

Dagmar named the baby Paris after her favourite yellow-lit city and the ancient wife-stealer. She thought, if I make my daughter seducer she will never be seduced.

Never, perhaps ever has mother been closer to daughter than Dagmar was with Paris. Conjugilant. Roots of one below the skin of the other. The baby's pursed lips closed round her swollen nipples eyes fixed on the light of *mater gloriosa* (soon to be *stabat mater*). She measured the length of her newborn daughter's foot with her index finger, wiped, dried, powdered that dimpling baby bottom and over-sized vulva, umbo of Venus shell.

Dagmar was dozing with her on the bed when Sam tapped on her window with a coin. Tap. Tap. Tap. That impish face of his at forty-five still like a young man's. When their four sons were young he used to come tap on the window and they'd go out to the greenhouse together to make love, to drink and smoke cigarettes together, to play music. And now once again, the night after Paris was born he came. She tucked four pillows around the baby on the bed and followed him over the paving stones, down the path, away from the house, into the greenhouse. He had lit torches in the back by the seedlings and when Dagmar stepped inside she could smell humid green and the scent of smoke. The music was going, the plants swaying. Sam told her to wait and disappeared. In a few moments he crawled in from the side door in brown pants and shirt. He wore a stag mask with real horns on his head. He crouched in the flickering shadows, shoulders hunched, turning and dipping his heavy crown, dancing to the music, muzzle arcing in ponderous swoops. He pawed the ground and thrust forward his torso as if swimming against a hard current. Strung between his antlers was a swaying basket that held a painting of a girl stitching a satin blanket. Sam chanted with the music, "I will make your wedding with my flesh, build your house with my bones, roof it with my hide, paint it with my blood, fix my skull on your gate, make good drinking cups of my hooves."

"All my life he's been working out his theatre on me," Dagmar thought. He swayed toward her, pawing the floor, dipping shoulders and head under the heavy horns. He reached through the smoke to pull her up to him. She lifted off his mask and touched the blood blister on his lip with her tongue. Against the red glow of the insides of her eyelids she saw a child swaying in a basket.

But she was leaking milk and ached unwillingly for her new baby.

He followed her back up the path and into the bedroom where the infant stirred with subtile hunger. Together Dagmar and Sam admired her tiny limbs and face as Dagmar lay down and guided pink lips to nipple and winced as the child latched on until the pain of pull gave way to milk's easing. Paris sucked well and strongly and Dagmar's eyes watched lazy Sam stretched out in front of her, familiar smile wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, the small faded scar on his cheek where, two decades before, she had scraped her wedding ring hard down his face because he was sleeping with other women. When the baby dozed, Sam nuzzled into Dagmar sucking some of her milk for himself until she pushed him off.

"You'll be wanting me around now," he said.

"You're not coming back. Don't get that in your head," she answered.

"A girl needs a father."

"I've been trying to figure a way around that."

His love for her was gouged like initials carved in a wooden school desk. He saw the girl he'd stolen away from a picnic, not the woman who'd raised his sons, who ran a greenhouse and fed a household of six while he flirted with flat-bellied music students. She was forty-five years old now and she'd been thinking about resting before she got pregnant with this one. Time and trouble will tame a young woman but an old woman is undaunted by any earthly force. Too late now. Dagmar was still a girl when Sam spoiled all men forever for her. She dozed beside Paris and when she woke up she found a piece of paper Sam had stuck under her pillow and against her will she was in love all over again. Over and over again.

I sent a daughter to my love
In a thrushy basket.
She nursed her to a mothered rest
Singing a song that what loves best
Loves and loves, forgets the rest
I sent a daughter to my love
In a thrushy basket.

With and against him all her life. Gods and mortals. Age and youth. The living and the dead. It all begins and ends forever and forever with a woman and a man. Suffering — a shadow of godlife. And passion. Dagmar stroked her new daughter's cheek. She couldn't bear that she would ever suffer, not in this life, not Paris. She would always protect her. Dagmar's mother was tougher with her. Norea expected suffering.