



PROJECT MUSE®

For The First Mother: A Litany, and: Liquescent, and:
Foresight, and: The Woman Speaks

Toni Stuart

Callaloo, Volume 41, Number 1, Winter 2018, pp. 84-89 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2018.0021>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/736827>

FOR THE FIRST MOTHER: A LITANY

by Toni Stuart

- O Mother of two skins
O Mother of betrothal and betrayal
O Mother of two sins
O Mother of ash and animal fat
- O Mother praying to two gods
 who did you pray to, kneeling in the church?
 who did you pray to, kneeling at the cairn?
- O Mother of lust and love
O Mother bent by men's dreams
O Mother of undiagnosed despair
- O Mother praying to two gods
 did you remember to pray for us?
- O Mother disowned
 by the people who birthed you
O Mother un-mothered
O Mother disowned
 by the people who raised you
O Mother of brokenness
O Mother disowned
 by the people you birthed
O Mother forgotten
O Mother, against your skin compassion never brushed
O Mother
O Mother
- O Mother praying to two gods
 did you remember to pray for yourself?
- O Mother of our lost wildness
O Mother, keeper of our buried voices
 unearth them for us

LIQUESCENT

by Toni Stuart

the mother then put her fingers into her child's mouth—gently forcing it open; she touches her tongue to the child's tongue, and holding the tiny mouth open, she blows into it—hard. she was blowing words—her words, her mother's words, those of her mother's mother, and all their mothers before—into her daughter's mouth.

—*M. NourbeSe Philip*, Discourse on the Logic of Language

my skin is an empty sheet of paper
waiting for words to fall against it.

faint blue lines are listening
for the mother's tongue
for the mother's mother's tongue
for the mother's mother's mother's tongue

splayed tongue
dumb tongue
twisted tongue
cut tongue
forked tongue
mute tongue

mute tongue

a mute tongue licked letters
across my newborn flesh,
invisible ink leaked deep

when breasts and hips pushed
me into woman
and womb and milk pushed
me into mother
and child and root pushed
me into question

CALLALO

i carried my blank sheet
back to the looking glass
trying to peer deep enough
to read beneath my darkness

i turned on the light
but the filament burnt out
i lit a candle
but the wick burnt out
i struck a match
but the flame snuffed out

i pressed the blank sheet of my face
flat against the cold glass
of Uncle's face
of Meister Van Riebeeck's face
of Pieter's face

but none could light a flame
bright enough to backlight
the answer to me, lying in wait

so i pressed my tongue flat
against the empty sheet of me
and tried to sink my teeth deep
enough to rip out the letters

but my teeth have forgotten
how to tear

so i press my face flat
against the cold glass
of the bottle's face
slide my tongue
down
into
its neck

and taste

FORESIGHT

by Toni Stuart

they say I am the reason the wind no longer blows
the Koina say I am the reason the seasons stand still
the Dutch say I am the reason the ships stand still

now I am Eva in my garden, deserted
now I am Krotoa wrapped in a kaross of no warmth
only Heitsi-Eb! knows what is to come:

my children will turn the silence of their backs
to me, De Klerk, Kruger, Smuts will all deny
the sweetness of my name in their blood.

THE WOMAN SPEAKS

by Toni Stuart

my tears spill down the flank
of Devil's Peak
my breath is the cloth
that sets Hoerikwaggo's table
I am the one
who invites you to eat
I am the one
who invites you to eat

I am the child of two Gods
my heart is a Hollander
but my soul prays to Heitsi-Eb!

I am the one
whose bones are strong enough
to carry the weight of two skins
I am the one
whose mouth is supple enough
to hold the secrets of two tongues

if you meet me in the veld,
know my feet have already returned to the fort
if you meet me inside the castle,
know my heart has already returned to the dunes

no matter who I tell you I am
do not believe me

no matter who I tell you I am
I am always
only
half
of myself