

work in progress

Exerpts: five poems from RELICT,  
a poetry manuscript  
written in the voice of Mary Todd Lincoln

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MAIDEN

I had a life before Lincoln.  
Life in Lexington. A house  
full of Todds. Some said  
I was overindulged. At least  
while mother lived. Some said  
grandmother beguiled me to  
buck my stepmother only to jar  
my father. A girl, I was steeped  
in the porcelain pot of rich men's  
table-talk politics—steeped like  
the black tea I was taught to serve.  
Some certainly contended I was over  
educated—for a woman. A waste  
they whispered. Too ambitious  
a soft voice cautioned. It won't  
end well my own sister feared.  
Not bred for housework or drudgery  
of cleaning dirty diapers despite  
all the babies that dripped from  
the women my father married.  
Cardinal directions—girls, boys.  
older, younger—rooms packed  
like a satchel. I slept at school.  
Home on weekends. Churched  
in social graces and more.  
Not allowed Latin, I took  
solace in French and classics  
and in like manner embroidery.

## Exerpt-Relict

Studied in romance and irony,  
I once said, if I can't be president  
I'll marry one. Life was only  
Lexington, and I was young  
eligible—ineligible—Mary Todd.

PANDORA'S HUSBAND

First time

I laid eyes on

him I thought it must hurt

to be so tall and wear that sharp

brutish

face. Those corners.

Angles. Long and sharp so

as to slit something in two. Cleave

something

as commonly

soft as cotton. I thought

he'd cut this girlish ribbon round

my neck,

slice open the

box of my ideas,

cut free

my rebellious nature,

then love me.

WORKING MOTHER

This afternoon I stood at the line,  
basket empty and baby napping,  
my face up to the first hot sun  
of the season, and began, of all things,  
to dance. My lips still kissing the light,  
sheets slicing into the breeze, my only  
audience. I lifted my arms in open  
circle, in worship of more elegant  
times. My head made its own music.

WHAT DAILY THINGS

Call your children in from play.  
Smell their dusty little heads  
all damp from running, chasing.  
Their smell like bread warm and ready  
for breaking. Underneath all this joy  
and chaos that is a mother's day,  
beneath all the games and gaiety  
balances a box of bones bleached  
so white they bely all those black  
bonnets and dresses. Keep your cubs  
close lest some germ anoint their  
vitality and their smiles slide slack,  
their fevers climb. Feel their breath  
at your purring lips, their shoulders  
tight against your henning hands  
until your breasts and eyes run dry,  
your hands fill with flowers. And then  
live a long time and recall every gone  
day as if it is this bare morning.

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## Exerpt-Relict

VISITOR

A boy stands at the foot of the bed,  
as if he has come in from play. As if  
he has a question to ask. As if  
he wants reassurance I am  
only sleeping. He is illuminated  
from within. As if he has swallowed  
a star. As if he carries pieces of  
heaven in his chest. It is afternoon,  
and in this unlit room, except  
from the boy's joy, shadows lengthen.  
I know him. He has been a boy  
for years and years. I don't tell them  
he comes to me, even when they  
inquire, because they will only extend  
my stay. It is our secret, as we had secrets  
before, when he might have become a man. As if  
he could have grown up. As if  
he could have grown old. He befriends me  
each time anew in his silence. He remains a  
promise. Even I am surprised he keeps me  
sane. I don't speak to him, for fear he  
cannot reply. I don't touch him for fear he  
will dissipate. We each look upon the other,  
holding all our possibilities between us.

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