

MARIANNE APOSTOLIDES



MIXED MEDIA COLLAGE BY
CATHERINE MELLINGER



FIRST EDITION

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Canada Council
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Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Funded by the
Government
of Canada

Financé par le
gouvernement
du Canada

Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. BookThug also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.

The author wishes to acknowledge the support of the Ontario Arts Council, through the Writers' Reserve and Writers' Works in Progress programs.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Apostolides, Marianne, author
Deep salt water / Marianne Apostolides ; Catherine Mellinger, artist.
-- First edition.

Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-1-77166-278-9 (softcover).--ISBN 978-1-77166-279-6 (HTML).--
ISBN 978-1-77166-280-2 (PDF).--ISBN 978-1-77166-281-9 (Kindle)

1. Apostolides, Marianne. 2. Authors, Canadian (English)--21st century--Biography. I. Mellinger, Catherine, 1980-, illustrator II. Title.

PS8601.P58Z46 2017

C818'.6

C2016-907834-5
C2016-907835-3

Mixed media collages by Catherine Mellinger photographed by Melanie Gordon
Cover image by Catherine Mellinger: Jellyfish, mixed media collage on paper, 2016
Interior images by Catherine Mellinger: She Swims, Scuba, Anemone, Whips, Muscle, Colony, Lungs
2, Seaweed (all) mixed media collage on paper, 2016

The production of these works was made possible by the Region of Waterloo Arts Fund.
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Marianne Apostolides author photograph by Melanie Gordon

PRINTED IN CANADA



Fetal development during the first trimester is the most active. During the first trimester fetal development has new things arriving every day and week.

#1.

Blythe was a fish in my body. Her eyes are open in the murk. My water broke and the whole sea spilled. It came without warning: the gush of the ocean. A sac of grief floods cities and women. I float like sleep until I'm emptied. Now I'm bone, and the hard-round planet will push to be born.

But I am confusing events.

Her eyes are glaciers: sparkle, ageless, all of time is in her eyes. She weeps, and years dissolve from history. I try to stop her: lick one tear. My lips will wrap around the capsule. It seems, for a time, I can almost forget why I'm sad.

She breathed through her navel he kisses. I like my oranges blood red. We stole avocados and peeled their skins. He fed me lotus like dinosaurs' eggs. We were young and in love. We were careless, in pleasure, but we saw the signs: *two lines equal*—

Flush our waste. The bodies drifted down the water. Who will decide? The decisions are made. We used our tongues. We tipped the balance. Vacuum, suction: how will we dispose of the dead? Lips blink in the murk—there's nothing to breathe. The oxygen only comes from a tube.

Her first cry, when I hear it, is the piercing surprise of living.

#2.

“Mama?”

“Yes, sweetie.”

“Why is there seaweed on your body?”

“Because I’m a woman.”

“Then I’m not a woman.”

“Not yet,” I say. But you will be, my love... “Now open wide.”

I place a grain of sand in her mouth, tucked deep beneath her tongue.

I was twenty-three when my pearl was formed. He hadn't yet kissed me; I already knew. I'm stubborn and wilful. My mother repeatedly called me a "misery." She wasn't wrong: I was never meant to be a child.

"Next slide, please."

He was giving a keynote. I sat at the back of the conference room. The slide dropped down: projected, bright, he described his findings. I watched his hands; I set my sights. When I awoke in the hotel bed, the jewel was luminous in my mouth.

"Next slide."

I learned from experience: Blythe would get her grain of sand from my clean fingers. This is the duty of the mother. My mom didn't realize; she never put the sand in my mouth. I discovered, by accident. Women were frolicking in the waves. The Greek wore swim trunks the colour of cherries; his mass of hair was matted and wet. It's the scent of the ocean. "He's catching fish with his hands," my mother said. In the rocks, in the shallows, where water is warm. He bent forward, ass high, both his hands submerged. "It doesn't need to be deep," he said. He winked, as if he'd caught me, looking.

"Next slide."

The man sold marble from quarries in Greece. He'd shown us samples, which we all touched. I liked the one with emerald green, with veins of black. He saw me, fondling. He wouldn't tell a soul, he said. Finger to his lips; fingers to my lips. The shower was running. My swimsuit was clammy; it rolled like a tube down my thighs in the water. The man was watching: smiles like cherries. My mother had warned me about the ocean, but he was family. We didn't suspect it. The marble was smooth, with a sheen like liquid. "Rub it," he said. He was panting now. He'd caught a fish. I heard the thrash. It's frantic, with the long-fat muscle in his palm. That night, I found a grain of sand in the folds of my body. I took it, furtive, to my tongue.

"Next slide, please."

This is the power of undertow: not blithe on the shore, with lotion, bikinis; with dry sand and music. That's not denial. That's ignorance, childhood: sun without blisters. But my will is monstrous. I see an octopus moving in water. The bulb of its head is the frightening part. We can feel it approaching: the suckers and tentacles, massive brain. It's jetting forward. I understand fear.

Slide like lava, warm and thickly: undertow.
Three-quarters of all species will be dead.

Her lifetime is ended, a curious thing.

With my head on his chest, I'll convince myself that the worst is over. Next slide, "*Please!*": the octopus is moving faster.