

STEFANIE KIRBY

FRUITFUL

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STEFANIE KIRBY'S FRUITFUL

explores the tragedy of pregnancy loss and motherhood in surreal, artful, compact poems that both chronicle and expand our understanding of the wombed body.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stefanie Kirby lives and writes along Colorado's Front Range. Her poems appear in *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Maine Review*, *SAND*, *Poet Lore*, and *Wildness*, among others, and have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best New Poets, and Best of the Net.



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PAGE ONE

ADVANCED PRAISE

"Stefanie Kirby's *Fruitful* is a remarkable lyric sequence about raising children during a pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage. If Chekhov advised that fraught subject matter be written 'somewhat colder,' then these expertly-crafted poems must have been written at absolute zero in Kelvin. The effect is a kind of creeping dread that increases with every line we read. A singular imagination, Kirby creates a new world, a world of intimate pain where the speaker's 'milk rings itself like an ocean' and her 'womb stacks / itself into cold, / neat cubes on / the linoleum.' This poetry just contains the unbearable—though contain it must—for 'to go under again would be to drown.'"

– CAROLYN HEMBREE,
AUTHOR OF *FOR TODAY*

"In *Fruitful*, Stefanie Kirby takes the reader into an utterly distinct, even unnerving, world. Her poetry conjures the womb as an originary site that expands beyond the biological into the geologic and even the cosmic. These gorgeous poems enact a kind of embodied surrealism in which familiar objects constantly morph—from uterus to keys to chain link fence to spade to tidal flood to a harvest brought in from outdoors—and that within a single poem! Despite the rich energy of image and word, Kirby confesses, 'I can tell this so many ways / but it always ends with loss, in a body that wants to be full.' Visceral, urgent, and startling, this is truly a body of work actively laboring, breaking open. Lyric necessity overtakes even desire: 'what's left / but to yield / unfold / in green' where the soil lies ready and 'cracks with need.'"

– ELIZABETH ROBINSON,
AUTHOR OF *RUMOR*

"In *Fruitful*, Stefanie Kirby helps us resee common metaphors for fertility (bearing fruit, barren soil) and forges new ones (icebergs detaching like afterbirth) in carefully crafted poems that bear stark witness to the glories and challenges of pregnancy and miscarriage. This fierce chapbook is an important addition to the canon of books addressing the double-sided coin of fertility and infertility. I was floored by page after page, and I'm excited to see what Kirby does next."

– LISA AMPLEMAN,
AUTHOR OF *MOM IN SPACE*

"'I can tell this so many ways / but it always ends with loss...' laments the speaker of 'The Womb Belongs to the Family,' a poem highlighting the focus of Stefanie Kirby's *Fruitful*: how to inhabit the inexhaustible grief and sense of permanent aftermath that emerges in the wake of miscarriage and stillbirth. Yet, across these image-rich poems, witness the speaker encounter her grief with equal ferocity: 'If there is buried / carnage, count on me to find it,' which she does, and with it, constructs another womb—that of the poem, where language mothers and 'grief grows best,' rigorously, fruitfully, into the light."

– SUSAN L. LEARY,
AUTHOR OF *DRESSING THE BEAR*

LETTER TO THE READER

DEAR READER,

During one of my pregnancies, I attended a birth class that asked participants to visit and spend time traversing a labyrinth. My husband and I put the exercise off until the last minute, and one cold winter evening, we parked in the empty lot of a suburban church that boasted one of the only labyrinths in our area. It was simple and a bit disappointing: small stones set into the dirt of what was probably a garden in summer, the path just wide enough to fit a single body moving in and out along its curves.

A labyrinth's a bit like a maze, except that rather than moving through the winding path from one side to another, a labyrinth winds walkers into its middle and out again along the same path. The entrance and the exit, too, are the exact same. What matters, we were told, is the transformation that happens as a result of the journey. So, we stumbled over the frozen ground in the dark. We made our way in, and we made our way out. We hurried back to our car.

Later in class, the instructor said that becoming a mother—a process called *matrescence*—is like a labyrinth. The nine months of gestation are the winding inward toward birth, and moving back out from that moment takes around two years. *Matrescence*, she argued, is a process that extends past birth and encompasses far more time than the hours of labor. It takes much longer to fully grow into the identity of a mother.

Years onward, I know that the instructor was wrong. *Matrescence*, that winding out from the labyrinth from the moment of giving birth, has taken much, much longer than two years. I'm not sure that an entire lifetime will be enough, or that one ever achieves a grounded state of motherhood at the labyrinth's exit. Sometimes I believe that motherhood is the labyrinth itself, a space of coiled paths that refuses to release me.

I wanted *Fruitful* to echo this winding. The poems in the collection don't attempt to chronicle my particular pregnancy loss, though it is certainly the central touchstone around which the collection revolves, much like the center of a labyrinth. Still, these poems seek no neat conclusions, no sudden revelations, no endings that conclude a journey. Instead, the poems approach the labyrinth of *matrescence* as I've experienced it. I hope you'll choose to wander this path for a while with me.

ALL MY BEST,
STEFANIE KIRBY

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PAGE THREE

THE LETDOWN

When they ask me what's for dinner, the milk overhears. The milk calls the name my mother used to call me at dinnertime like a bell. The milk rings itself like an ocean, like traffic underfoot. The milk comes in waves of sound, grows tiny feet for pursuit: a swarm of centipedes in their white, milky shells. *Feed them, feed them!* it cries. I'm a magpie then, black wings for contrast and the lift I need, yet this milk isn't fooled. It peels back its eyelids and roars behind my feathered flight. The milk becomes an overcast sky, bakes two suns into the clouds like golden eyes. I can hide in the shade until the milk turns to noon, evaporates my reprieve, sucks my shadow back inside me. I turn myself to stone, unmoved. The sky melts back to milk. Milky tears smear those weeping suns, channel through my stone chest to feed the world like a fountain: a body sprung with leaks.