

The House of Fecundity · Sharon Olds

After my girl's first gerbils die,
the tumors sprouting like purple broccoli on their stomachs,
after she gets the new gerbils and we
hang over their cage, watching them
rub their dark hairy faces with their
miniscule hands,
after my boy gets his first mice and they
fight, one going for the other's belly,
throat, jaws, horrible squeaks
cracking the air, after he gets his
second pair and we hang over their cage,
watching the shuddering noses, delicate
gluey toes, long raw
tendon of the tail, I have had it! Thirty-two
tiny hands and feet, sixteen
soft bellies in danger, this mixture of
pus and blood and excrement and
love is all too much for me, it
takes me back too far, stomach and
nose and the back of my mind like the battered
blackness behind the moon, to those years of the
animal, those years I was six feet
under in dark motherhood, my
mind a flooded field, the water
going down slowly. Now the children's
rooms begin to reek gently of
maternity, paternity, I
tell you I cannot sink down again, I
cannot do it, I have got to rise from
childbed at last, wipe the scarlet
mucus off my thighs, I've got to
get on with it. I have done my time in the
breaking-shed, the birthing-room, the
slaughterhouse, the pit, I walk

away through a haze of cedar chips, the
gold dust of life, a free
woman at last, a rational guide to the universe.