

## Hisham Matar

Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Return*

*The Angel's Predicament*, excerpt from "A Month in Siena," pp.107-110.

"... A few days later I went to the museum at the Oratorio di San Bernardino to see one of the strangest paintings of the Sienese School. Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Madonna del latte* is even more outrageous than it appeared in the various reproductions I had seen. It is hard to think of a more unsettling representation of a mother and child. Mary is placid and seemingly vacant as she looks down at her boy with a resignation that brings to mind a trapped servant thinking hard of a way out. There is a cunning quality to her intelligence that seems to be flirting with a cautious and questioning attitude towards her fate.

She is not sure she likes this situation. Her veil ropes around her neck and might just be the reason why she has turned towards her child -in other words, it might be motherly love, but it might also be motherly love, but is might also be restriction. This makes her embrace as much attempt to keep the child near as it is, perhaps, to keep him away. Her right hand, which is shelving the boy's left buttock is oddly doubtful. The fingers of the other hand, which is clasped around the child's small left shoulder, are open and perfectly parallel.

Like the metal bars of an iron cage. It is with that hand that she nudges the fabric of the sheet he is wrapped in against his ear, muffling the ear that is facing us, which makes the boy's gesture of turning to look directly at us with this sardonically raised eyebrow seem wary and curious, but also rebellious. He asks to know what we are really thinking, and what it is that his mother does not wish for him to hear. He is also wondering what it is exactly that he is earning from us: admiration or envy; and does not seem sure which he would prefer. He sees no reason why he cannot have both.

Like any child caught in public with his mother, he is concerned about his image. But, unlike any other child, this one is aware of his powers and conscious too of the options they give him. His legs are climbing as though he is freshened by our sudden appearance, or perhaps he is desirous of his mother, wanting to claim her further for himself. Either way, there is a sexual quality to his excitement' it has the urge of lust. The little fingers of his left hand are wrapped around his mother's left breast and greedily squeezing it. His right hand looks like is it trying to peel off his golden halo to get it out of the way.

His lips have already claimed the nipple, and do so lavishly. He is gorging himself. Under no circumstances is he interested in death. He wants to live and live well. He wants to have it all. He is a child who has no qualms about his appetites. He is as assertive as he is free. His left foot, which presses against his mother's arm, seems to be a rejection of his filial reality. His other foot, the right foot of the child who is to change the world, is testing the painting's frame, threatening to shatter it, to blow the whole picture wide open."



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nursing\\_Madonna](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nursing_Madonna)

