

WHAT KEEPS ME UP AT NIGHT: AN  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF NEW MOTHERHOOD

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## DEDICATION

To Matt and Madeleine, my muse and my light. To Victoria Batten, my mentor, my confidant, my friend.



© Emily Hull, *Meringue & Memories.com*, ["Oh, Baby!"](#)

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Abstract: New motherhood is messy and wild and unstructured. Its shape, if motherhood has a shape, is amorphous and pliable like melted glass. This evocative autoethnography, a collection of experimental flash essays and reflective commentary, illuminates the scattershot experiences I have encountered in the broader cultural milieu of motherhood. My autoethnography has a rhythm—a systematicity. The essays and reflections result from the detailed and systematic field notes and observations I gathered during the first two years of my daughter’s life. I deliberately created pieces that followed non-chronological structures to best represent my lived experiences as a new mother. I offer no singular narrative about new motherhood. While there is a clear beginning point—the point when life first flickers in my womb—there is no plot, no moment of release, no dénouement. The autoethnographic “I” exists in many modes in this project: collage essays, braided essays, faux interviews and re-imagined birth plans, imaginary dictionary entries, poetry, and an essay composed entirely of handwritten letters addressed to my future self. These experimental texts, when considered as a whole, offer a multitude of voices and perspectives that form and inform my reality and truth. The reflective pieces also provide a voice and an additional sense of understanding that opens a space for further contemplation.

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## SECTION I

### BEGINNINGS

*Wednesday, September 25, 2013*

It's five in the morning. I should be asleep. I'm two weeks past my due date and I'm edgy. And swollen. I cannot get situated in the pillow fort I call my bed. Pillows are stuck between my legs, behind my back, under my head. I cradle my pregnant belly while one leg begins its descent to the floor. I grunt as the other leg finally joins its partner. I have to pee. Again. For the fifth time tonight. Or is it morning? Hell if I care. I stagger to the bathroom like a Weeble Wobble toy. I use the wall as leverage to sit on the toilet. I look down and notice a rust-hued stain on my panties. What's this? Blood? My mucous plug? Is this labor? My head is light. The pain subsides after five minutes. False alarm.

It's five in the afternoon. I keep waiting for unbearable waves of pain to overtake me. I keep waiting for contractions to start. I've experienced minor pain for the last ten hours. Cramps. Mild cramps, no worse than regular period cramps. I take a walk with my husband. We walk and we walk and nothing

changes. I begin to wonder if I'll be a freak of nature who doesn't experience pain during labor or birth. I swear I've read about at least one woman who claimed labor was easy. Pleasurable, even.

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I'm wrong about the pain thing. My pain isn't debilitating but I can't say the sensation of having a thousand little needles stabbing my uterus every fifteen minutes is comfortable. I download an app that's supposed to help me measure contractions. The problem is I have to figure out when the contraction starts and when it stops and I can't manage to focus. I give up on the contraction app and head to the bathroom.

I draw a hot bath and hoist myself into the tub. The water covers my body; I laugh to myself for no good reason when I notice my belly move. The baby must like the warm water, too. I watch what must be a foot kick my belly button. I practice deep breathing. I fumble around for a bottle of lavender oil and pour a few drops into the bath water. I place the bottle near my nose and I inhale. I start to relax. The pain has subsided long enough for me, once again, to imagine that labor can't be that terrible. For a moment, I begin to convince myself that I'll have a natural birth. Ina May Gaskin, here I come. Or not. Instead of tiny knives stabbing me, now it feels like a giant hand is squeezing my insides. The sensation passes and I step out of the tub and into the shower. The warm water soothes the pain temporarily.

I turn the shower water off, pat myself dry with a towel, and slip into the only piece of clothing that fits me comfortably (a hideous A-line, tie-dyed dress with blue and green swirls I bought at Walmart for five dollars; I wear this dress at least five times a week). I twist my wet hair into a low bun and pin it in place with bobby pins. I skip dinner (heartburn) and decide to watch a Big Bang Theory rerun in the living room. I sink into the couch and probably look like Lily Tomlin's five-year-old girl character, Edith Ann, sitting in that over-sized rocking chair. My contractions are getting more intense but they are spaced too far apart for me to call my doula, Elena. I close my eyes and I wait.

Just as I was drifting off to sleep, my body startles me. I jump up from the couch and run for the bathroom. A gush of amniotic fluid pours from my body onto the floor, leaving a trail of liquid behind me. My dogs follow me and refuse to leave my side—which is endearing under normal circumstances. It's not so endearing when the gushing doesn't stop and they keep sniffing my backside. I think of the movies I've watched when a woman's water breaks. It's supposed to be a sudden leak and then it disappears. No one told me that the fluid would leak and leak and leak. I call my parents. Matt calls our doula. I wait in the kitchen while Matt finds my overnight bag and puts it in the car. I cannot stand up straight. I cannot speak. I bend at the waist and hold on to the edge of the dining room table.

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It's nine o'clock at night. I'm in the back seat of our SUV with Elena. She helps me focus on my breath which does offset the pain a little. Like a millimeter.



We're driving along I-35 to Lakeside Women's Hospital in Oklahoma City. The OBGYN I'd seen in Stillwater left her practice when I was around 33 weeks along. There were no other doctors in town I wanted to see. It usually takes an hour to drive to Lakeside. Matt says we made the trip in 45 minutes. That seems a bit speedy to me, but what do I know. I was too busy dealing with blinding, life-altering pain to notice much else. We pull into the hospital parking lot and ring the red, after-hours buzzer the nurses had told us about during a prior visit. Fluid continues to leak from my body. The back of my dress is soaked. I continue to bend forward and lean on my doula while attempting to check into the hospital. There are a set of locked doors blocking the entrance to the nurse's station.

"My wife is in labor. Let us in," my husband says.

A stern guard who was standing next to the nurse replies, "We need to see your ID." He opened the door and repeated, looking at me, "You can't check in without your ID."

I'm sweaty and leaking amniotic fluid and in an unspeakable amount of pain. I tell him, "It's in my purse."

My purse is in the car. I continue to stand at a 90-degree angle while Matt runs to the car and gets my purse. He fishes out my driver's license and we prove that I, in fact, am pre-registered at this hospital. That I, pregnant woman who is about to sprawl her body on the hospital floor and push a baby out, is indeed who I say I am.

A young nurse leads me to the triage room. The room must have been a utility closet. There's just enough space in this windowless, white room for a bed and fetal monitors. I'm trapped in triage for what feels like hours. The nurse, possibly a nurse-in-training judging by her nervousness, doesn't believe that I'm in labor. She wants to swab my vagina with a long Q-tip to confirm that I'm leaking amniotic fluid and not urine. I keep telling her, in between gasps and groans, that I'm positive this is actual labor. She leaves; Elena reminds me to breathe. When she finally returns to check on me, I let her do the swab. Guess who was right? Why argue with a woman in labor? The pain has changed from stabs and grabs to searing, burning waves. Elena and Matt hold my arms and help me to the labor room. The labor room reminds me of my grandmother's nursing home bedroom with its sea foam green floral couch back with coordinating sea foam fabric seats, gleaming laminate floors, and hospital bed. I am relieved to rest on my side in bed. At this point, the pain is so intense that I cannot speak and I cannot focus my eyes on anything but the ceiling. In my speechless and blurry-eyed state, the nurse starts handing me paperwork to sign. I conjure my best "Are you fucking kidding me?" glare but I utter something more along the lines of "ugh" while scribbling my name. Then I yell-whisper, "Epidural."

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*Thursday, September 26, 2013*

Matt and Elena sit on either side of my bed. It's two in the morning and the anesthesiologist hasn't arrived. I'm starting to panic a little because I am having the

urge to push. Urge isn't a strong enough word. The sensation is so completely beyond my control that there is nothing I can do to stop by body from pushing the baby out. It's bedlam. I've accepted the pain and have quit thinking. I sit straight up in bed, ready to change positions and squat on the floor. I hear a knock on the door. My savior from pain, the anesthesiologist, is walking towards me. I resume my seat on the edge of my bed and while I'm experiencing another contraction and urge to push he inserts a long needle into my spine. I didn't feel a thing. For the first time since 9 p.m. the previous day, I breathe deeply. Although I didn't know it at the time, the nap I take for the next four or five hours will be the last nap I'll take as the self that I know—the last nap I'll take alone.

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I watch the monitor I'm hooked up to measure my contractions. I'm elated that I still have no feeling in the lower half of my body. Nurses come and go and measure my cervix. I'm dilated nearly 10 centimeters. It's almost time to push. When the next nursing shift begins at around 7 am, I'm relieved to see the nurse I met in the triage room leave. I have a new nurse; my delivery nurse and she's everything I could have asked for. She's smart, tells good stories, and immediately puts me at ease. My labor has slowed, despite my dilation, and she asks if she can add Pitocin to my IV. Even though my legs are numb, I regain enough feeling to notice the contractions. My nurse raises the back of my bed up and places my feet in stirrups. She counts to three and tells me to push. I cannot tell how forceful my pushes are, but I push as hard as I can.

I'm naked and sweaty and have lost all sense of what I've always called "reality". I continue to push at the count of three. I continue pushing until I feel a burning sensation. She's crowning. The top of my daughter's head is in this world; the rest of her body remains in the birth canal. She and I reside in an in-between space. I'm not yet a mother; she's not yet born. We're both at the threshold of transforming into two people we have yet to meet. Me, a mother; She, a daughter.

I push once more, my skin ripping as her head emerges. A team of doctors and nurses surround me, waiting to catch her as her shoulders slip out.

It's 10:17 a.m., Thursday, September 26, 2013. My daughter, Madeleine, weighs eight pounds, eight ounces. The doctor places her on my chest. Her bright blue eyes scan the room and take in every detail. There's a smear of blood on her bald head, but no white cottage cheese like vernix. I hold her to my breast and she nurses for the first time. My legs remain numb and my body shivers from the epidural wearing off. But she's here. She's here and I'm a mother.

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*Thursday, September 26, 2013*

*10:00 p.m.*

I should have brought a heavier sweater to the hospital. I wrap myself in a lightweight white and gray jacket, a North Face knock-off, but I cannot shake the cold. It's got to be 65 degrees in here at the warmest. The cold is the least of my concerns, though. What I'm concerned about is peeing (an old habit from pregnancy

that's hard to break). I touch a button on my bed's remote control to raise up. I wince when I attempt to stand. Earlier I'd turned down my nurse's offer for pain medication. Pain pills make me nauseous and I was in no mood to vomit on myself. I regret the decision. I finally force my body off the bed and stumble for a second as my feet come land on the icy floor. I glance at the bed sheets behind me and notice a pool of dried blood. I make a mental note to ask the nurse for clean sheets later.

Is this what new motherhood is like? Limping to the bathroom while trying to ignore the bloody mess you made in the sheets? Motherhood: the word itself has only been in existence in English since the 1590s. Motherhood, we could say, is a state of being; a fulfillment of biological destiny. But I don't have time to ponder my newly acquired state of being because my daughter is in the night nursery and the nurses will bring her to me any minute. I shuffle my feet in an attempt to hurry to the bathroom. Is motherhood supposed to hurt this much? I'm only a few hours in and my body isn't my body any longer—it's shrapnel trying to work its way out of my skin. I stagger back to my bed and see the night nurse with my daughter.

"Her eyes are open and she's ready to eat," says the nurse. She unwraps Madeleine from her swaddling blanket and hands her to me. I marvel at how refreshed and alert my infant appears. Her skin warms my skin as I feed her. The nurse leaves and I continue to hold Madeleine in my arms. Her bassinet stands within inches of my bed. I try adjusting the swaddling blanket but can't get it wrapped tightly enough. Madeleine cries; she must know I'm eying the bassinet and that I am plotting to put her inside it. I give up and wait for the night nurse to return. She doesn't. Somehow I'd missed that I am supposed to buzz her. I want more than

anything to fall asleep. I fight my delirium. I fight my delirium with such valor that the nurse startles me when she shows up. I was asleep. I expect a lecture about sleeping with an infant in my arms, but she takes my baby. I fall asleep again, knowing that I will wake up in two hours to nurse Madeleine.

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*Sunday, September 29, 2013*

*11:00 a.m.*

I learned how to change a diaper yesterday. A nurse kept telling me Madeleine's diaper was dirty. And I kept staring at her with my red and pleading droopy eyes, before saying, "I don't know how." She pitied me, I think.

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Right before my husband arrived at the hospital to take us home (there's an "us" now), I'd complained to the nurses about my pain. I stood, shoulders slumped, in the cold hospital recovery room and asked the nurse on duty a question.

"Can I have something for my pain? The night nurse didn't give me my medication." I suffered third degree vaginal tearing during delivery and my body recoiled at the thought of the hour car ride home.

"No," she said.

“Look, I have an hour drive ahead of me and I’m in a tremendous amount of pain. I haven’t had anything since yesterday.”

The nurse hands me my pill.

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We’re in the car on our way home. A real family. I sit in the backseat next to Madeleine who is sleeping. I marvel at her tiny fingers as she grasps my thumb. I place my hand on her chest and watch it rise and fall in rhythm with her noisy baby breaths.

I’m not ready for this. I’m not ready for this joy, this exhaustion, this unexplored terrain that is motherhood.

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It’s Sunday night—my first night alone with Madeleine. I’ve insisted that my mother return home. I’ve insisted that my husband sleep in another room.

“You’ve got to wake up early for work tomorrow,” I tell him. “One of us has to be sane.” The lamp beside my bed softly shines as I cradle the baby in my arms. I’ve read the best parenting books; I have watched the Happiest Baby on the Block DVD and know all about the 5 S’s: swaddle, side or stomach, shush, swing, suck. This baby will sleep in her bassinet; I will sleep in my bed.

I am going to handle this alone. It’s what I believe I want.

I spend the night swaddling and un-swaddling my daughter. I shush and I swing and I rock and nothing works. The baby cries when she leaves my arms. Time stops; the lamp beside my bed glows. It's two in the morning, three, four, five. I'm awake. Why am I awake?

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I remember reading about newborn care in 18th century France during the first trimester of my pregnancy for a class I was taking. Wealthy women often sent their newborns away—city women, Parisians mostly, would ship their babies as far as 125 miles from home to be under the care of a wet nurse for up to five years. Maids swaddled these unfortunate newborns so tightly for this journey that many suffocated to death before arriving to their nurse. Most mothers didn't bother naming their babies. Why would they? If the infant survived the trip to the wet nurse, he or she was likely to die from an infectious disease passed through the wet nurse's milk (like syphilis). These babies were nameless, shadow beings. They were, as Victor Turner put it, "liminal personae" or "threshold people, necessarily ambiguous...neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between" (p. 96).

This is who I am, a threshold person. My baby is in my arms and happy and alive and I wouldn't have it any other way—even without sleeping tonight. Tonight, this first night of mothering on my own, I do not recognize myself. I'm waiting for that recognition, that self-awareness to materialize—somewhere, anywhere. "Liminality," Turner continues, "is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness...to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon" (p. 96).



*Sunday, September 27, 2015*

*9:11 p.m.*

I missed seeing a blood moon eclipse tonight. My daughter fell asleep an hour before the moon turned crimson and we're resting together in the darkness of my bedroom. The moonlight creeps through a crack in the blinds of a small window that faces opposite our bed and casts a stream of white light on the floor. She's sleeping in the crook of my arm, her face close enough to mine that I can count each one of her eyelashes. My cell phone, which I keep in my free hand, vibrates with a text message from my mother, "Do you see the blood moon? There won't be another one like it until 2033." I reply, "No, Madeleine is asleep."

How many moments will we have like this? How much longer until she doesn't need me anymore? Tonight she sleeps in my embrace. Tonight her body's warmth lulls me to sleep. My daughter turned two a day before the eclipse and her birthday reminded me of the woeful fact that I cannot stop time. Her second birthday reminded me that her babyhood has ceased and we are entering into the throes of toddlerhood. When the next blood moon eclipse fills the night sky Madeleine will be twenty years old. Where will she watch it? In my arms?

I'm compulsive about remembering my early days of motherhood. My memory, however, is like grains of sand inside an hourglass. My memories are formless; they, like the sand, are impossible to hold granule by granule. I remember the only way I know how: I write. I write to recall, to reflect, to ruminate. I write to

capture new motherhood's tedium, joy, boredom, isolation, guilt, exhaustion, and tender moments.

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*Tuesday, August 26, 2014*

*4:05 p.m.*

My daughter bounces in her bright blue exersaucer and pushes a lime green iguana that flashes red, yellow, and blue lights, delighting herself when it sings the same obnoxious ditty I've heard at least 50 times today. "Red, yellow, blue-blue-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo." This is the music of my life. This is the live band I listen to everyday in my living room. Madeleine spins around in the exersaucer and pushes another button. "C, Cat." Another song plays.

My mind drifts to the stack of books about motherhood piled on the couch in my office. Earlier today, when I had a friend over to watch Madeleine for the afternoon, I started sifting through my pile. Considering my obsession to understand and record my experiences with new motherhood, I am unnervingly baffled about where to start reading. When I was pregnant, I generally avoided parenting books and motherhood memoirs and mommy blogs. I wasn't a total fool, though. I, at least, read the essentials: Dr. Sears' *The Baby Book: Everything You Need to Know About Your Baby from Birth to Age Two*; Heidi Murkoff's *What to Expect While You're Expecting*. After the first two or three chapters, however, I shut the books away in

my nightstand drawer. It all seemed like too much information—too much change to ingest. Today I begin at the portion of my journey I recall most vividly: birth.

Reading other women's birth stories is personal and idiosyncratic and addictive. The stories I discovered in Eleanor Henderson and Anna Solomon's edited essay collection, *Labor Day: True Birth Stories By Today's Best Women Writers*, for instance, were stories of agony, *it was like a building erupting from me*<sup>1</sup>, of competition, *The stories of my birth and my brother's birth are legendary in our family, mainly because my mother repeats them so often*<sup>2</sup>, of otherworldliness, *I pushed so long and hard I didn't know what I was pushing anymore—my baby's body or mine*<sup>3</sup>, and of perseverance, *You know that nightmare of a three-day labor I painted? Well, I had a five-day labor*<sup>4</sup>. Other birth stories, such as Caitlin Moran's story in *How to Be A Woman*, were rife with self-blame, *It was no surprise at all to me to discover I was terrible at giving birth. No surprise at all. All that I know about birth is what I've seen from my mother— returning after delivering every sibling as white as death; hobbling into the house seven times with a bad story: a breech, an emergency caesarean, a trapped nerve, a tangled cord*<sup>5</sup>.

What do these birth stories, these varied experiences, signify? When I was pregnant I avoided discussing my pregnancy with other expectant mothers. I'd

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<sup>1</sup> See Anna Solomon. "What I'm Trying to Say" in *Labor Day: True Birth Stories by Today's Best Women Writers* (p. 20). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition. 2014

<sup>2</sup> See Ann Hood. "This Life" in *Labor Day: True Birth Stories by Today's Best Women Writers* (p. 83). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition. 2014

<sup>3</sup> See Strayed, Cheryl. *The Lavender Room*. In *Labor Day: True Birth Stories by Today's Best Women Writers* (p. 198). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition. 2014

<sup>4</sup> See Arielle Greenburg in *Labor Day: True Birth Stories by Today's Best Women Writers* (p. 246). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition. 2014

<sup>5</sup> See Moran, Caitlin. *How to Be a Woman* (p. 211). Harper Perennial. Kindle Edition. 2012

inevitably hear pontifications and judgments about everything involved in the birthing process. Regardless of the choices I made for my birth, it felt like I was wrong. I looked to Rachel Cusk's memoir, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* for advice. She explains that "Birth is not merely that which divides women from men: it also divides women from themselves, so that a woman's understanding of what it is to exist is profoundly changed. Another person has existed in her, and after their birth they live within the jurisdiction of her consciousness" (p. 7). She's right. Perhaps the women in which I interacted (myself included) were compensating for their lack of understanding of the radical change within. Cusk's explanation makes me think of the second stanza of Wallace Stevens's poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." *I was of three minds, /Like a tree/In which there are three blackbirds. A mother giving birth is of three minds, like the lobed leaves of a Montpellier maple tree: the baby, her former self, and the self that is to be born.*

It's difficult for me to read about birth without thinking about death. In a sense, birth and death summon a similar mindset: a baby in the womb is living but not born—alive but not living. The unknown is palpable in the transition from womb to world. And the unknown is palpable in death, in the transition from the living world to the world of the afterlife or to nothingness, depending on one's beliefs. The chances that a mother would die during childbirth in 2013, the year I gave birth, were double what they were in 1980, the year my mother gave birth to me.<sup>6</sup> In 2013, according to

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<sup>6</sup> Refer to [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/maternal-deaths-in-childbirth-rise-in-the-us/2014/05/02/abf7df96-d229-11e3-9e25-188e1fa93b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/maternal-deaths-in-childbirth-rise-in-the-us/2014/05/02/abf7df96-d229-11e3-9e25-188e1fa93b_story.html)

the CDC, there were 23,440 infant deaths; 596.1 deaths per 100,000 live births.<sup>7</sup> I had reason to be afraid.

“Listen Paula,” writes Isabel Allende in the opening line of her memoir, *Paula*, “so when you wake up you will not feel so lost.” I read *Paula* when I was 26 years old and childless while lounging on a park bench one summer in the town square of Antigua, Guatemala. I was teaching English to local school children for a month, and Allende’s book was my respite. Strangers would come up to me and comment, *Qué triste*. How sad. And the book was indeed sad and haunting and mesmerizing. Paula, Allende’s only child, collapses into a coma and never wakes up. The entire memoir reads like an intimate letter from a mother to her beloved daughter. Her death is at once heart-wrenching and ethereal, much like the death of Joan Didion’s daughter, Quintana Roo, in her memoir, *Blue Nights*. As devastating as Allende and Didion’s memoirs were, though, essayist Kelly Fig’s 2015 piece in the literary magazine *Creative Nonfiction*, “Do No Harm,” was maddening and unfair. Fig’s doctor callously tells her “your baby is dead” during a routine prenatal visit. Just like that Fig’s life unravels. There’s no softening of the news, no regard for her feelings. I wish I could offer her comfort.

Motherhood is contradiction: it’s struggle and joy. “There’s the parenting life of our fantasies,” writes Jennifer Senior in *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*, “and there’s the parenting life of our banal, on-the-ground realities” (p. 1). Finding the balance between the struggle and the joy is trying for any parent. As

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/infant-health.htm>

a first time mother, I search for that balance daily. The contradiction was harder for me to comprehend in the early days of new motherhood. How could I go from total bliss one moment to internal turmoil the next? No one prepared me for the paradox, for the contradiction. I recall reading Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year* in the middle of the night when I'd wake up to nurse my daughter. I highlighted part of this sentence, "...but one of the worst things about being a parent, for me, is the self-discovery, the being face to face with one's secret insanity and brokenness and rage."<sup>8</sup> Highlighting a sentence with one hand at 2 a.m. while cradling a nursing baby, by the way, isn't easy. Recognizing my own secret insanity and brokenness and rage isn't easy, either. I recoil every time I pick up the books in my stack about postpartum depression. I have two such books beside me right now. There's Adrienne Martini's *Hillbilly Gothic: A Memoir of Madness and Motherhood*. While my journey with postpartum depression hasn't been anything like hers, I understand her brokenness, her despair. And there's Susan Johnson's *A Better Woman: A Memoir*. Johnson suffered from a severe fistula after giving birth to her children. Her depression was one resulting from a broken body. Again, completely different from my experience but when she writes about her personal darkness I stand beside her. I get it.

This literary journey through motherhood, while informative, has left me both satiated and unsatisfied. My brain practically bursts with the experiences and voices of other mothers. But I don't see myself. And that's exactly why I spend my days and nights reading these writers. I read to understand; I read to discover a "me" I cannot

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<sup>8</sup> See pp. 36-37

find elsewhere. I read to devour knowledge of a larger culture. I read so that I'm not alone. Yet, somehow, I am alone. And, somewhere, there has to be more.

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My vision is blurry today. Madeleine was awake at 2 this morning and I couldn't go back to sleep. I'm on campus for a meeting with my dissertation advisor. I sit in a chair opposite her and I have to squint periodically to see her face clearly. I want to write about motherhood, but I'm unsure how to go about it.

"Have you considered writing an autoethnography?" she asks.

I fidget with my pen. I'd read plenty of studies about ethnography during my days as a Master's student in linguistics—Erving Goffman, Dell Hymes, Elinor Ochs, Bambi Schieffelin, John J. Gumperz — but those days were distant.

"No," I admit.

She hands me a book by sociologist Carolyn Ellis called, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*. The story takes place in a fictional classroom, which allows Ellis to explore the process of writing and teaching autoethnography. In all my years as a student I'd never encountered a book like this. I think of the first social science report I wrote as a sophomore Cognitive Psychology major. We were learning the Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion format for writing a research report based on quantitative, experimental data. Our professor warned us that we would all submit multiple drafts. Everyone failed the first draft, even me. I earned a 65% which is the lowest grade I've ever received on any type of

written assignment. I, and my classmates, were shocked and worried. We didn't understand the conventions of the social science community; this paper was our initiation. I eventually earned an A after submitting multiple drafts, which was the point of the assignment. The experience has stayed with me, and I recall it as I open the book to page 37 and read Ellis' definition of autoethnography:

Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness...Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition.

Autoethnography isn't written in the style of the research reports I wrote as an undergraduate and later as a graduate student. When I was learning how to write like a social scientist in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the first person was forbidden. I realize that conventions for using the first person in research articles have changed over the last eighteen years, but it's hard for me to "un-see" the red pen marks that plagued me as a novice social science writer. Autoethnographers write in the first person. And, as Ellis points out on page 38, "autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms—short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, scripts, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and



social science prose.” I knew this methodology was right for me. I’d already moved away from the social science writing I used to do in my undergraduate and Master’s studies as a Ph.D. student in Rhetoric and Professional Writing. This methodology and process and product will permit me, I decided after reading *The Ethnographic I*, to express my lived experiences with new motherhood in a form that captures my voice, that captures how I want to express myself as a writer. Writing an autoethnography weirdly provides me with a reentry back to my social science writing roots—except this time I have a self-reflexive angle. I’m writing my way back into the social sciences in order to write my way out for good. A simultaneous reentry and exit. A revisiting of my writerly past to discover what my writerly future might become.

But first I had to determine what autoethnography meant *to me*.

Autoethnography, the cultural (-ethno) study (-graphy) of the self (-auto), is both a method and a writing practice that bridges personal stories with the broader cultural context. The method borrows from ethnography, the study of other cultures, in its data collection techniques and its general values (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011; Wall, 2006). Like ethnographers, autoethnographers insert themselves deep into the culture in which they study. They write thick descriptions—a term coined by linguistic philosopher Gilbert Ryle in 1968<sup>9</sup> and popularized by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in 1973 in the first chapter of *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*.

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<sup>9</sup> See Joseph Ponterotto’s discussion for a succinct history of “thick description” in

Ponterotto, Joseph G. "Brief note on the origins, Evolution, and meaning of the qualitative research concept Thick Description." *The Qualitative Report* 11.3 (2006): 538-549.

Thick description presumes that writing about a culture is convoluted and complicated. Thick description takes into account the “multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render” (p. 10). Thus, like the ethnographer, the autoethnographer collect many data sources, such as detailed and systematic personal observations, cultural artifacts, personal memories, relevant external observations, field notes, and journal entries, to support their interpretations (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography became popular in the 1980s as a postmodern response to how social science should be written and researched (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011). Scholars questioned the fundamental principles of science as applied to humans. Namely, principles such as legitimacy, objectivity, subjectivity, and representation were of concern.

Autoethnography confronts the illusion that social science writing and research is based solely upon scientific fact and truth. It acknowledges the human element that's always been present in research about people—that is, people—both the observed and the observers—tell complicated narratives, possess emotions, grapple with the variables of life that go beyond what can be scientifically measured and analyzed. This approach attempts to bridge science and the arts—which is one reason why autoethnography finds itself uncomfortably trapped between a science and an art. Scientists find it lacking in rigor; artists find it lacking in art.

Even autoethnographers themselves cannot agree on how best to write, research, and practice autoethnography. This tension exists because the world view

that 'scientists know best' casts a shadow over how and why autoethnographers work. There are two ideological sides that autoethnographers gravitate towards: (1) the evocative side—which emphasizes human emotion and the importance of the researcher's subjective reflections of it, and (2) the analytic side—which emphasizes values from traditional scientific methods of inquiry like objectivity and systematicity. The "tug of war," as analytic autoethnographer Heewon Chang (2008) puts it (p. 45), between the evocative and the analytic approaches comes down to the role objectivity and subjectivity play in social science. Chang states that "the objectivity position promotes the "scientific," systematic, approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation that can be validated by more than researchers themselves; on the other hand, the subjectivity position allows researchers to insert their personal and subjective interpretation into the research process." (45) Like Chang, Leon Anderson (2006) makes the case that analytic autoethnography can inch closer to the realist ideals of its scientific peers provided it possesses five key features: "(1) complete member researcher status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (p. 378). Chang and Anderson insist on incorporating these standards to their work in order to fight against the scathing criticisms others in their field have about autoethnography in general. When peers write articles calling autoethnography a pseudoscience that's lazy, unethical, and narcissistic (Delamont, 2007; Delamont, 2009)—one can understand why a researcher would double down on scientific principles and methodologies. Analytic

autoethnographers like Chang and Anderson want their work to be taken seriously. They want to be seen as legitimate scholars and researchers.

On the other end of the autoethnographic spectrum, though, are the evocative autoethnographers (Bochner, 2009; Crawley, 2002; Dashper, 2015; Davis, 2009; Denzin, 2004; Denzin, 2006; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 1995; Ellis, 1999; Ellis, 2002a; Ellis, 2002b; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Ellis, 2007; Ellis, 2009a; Ellis, 2009b; Holt, 2008; Jago, 1996; Rambo, 2005; Spry, 2001; Turner, 2013; Wall, 2006; Wall, 2008). While they too want their work to be taken seriously, not every autoethnographer agrees that the best way to do so is by staying within the hard sciences paradigm. Norman Denzin (2014, p. 70), an influential interpretative autoethnographer, summarizes the struggles evocative autoethnographers face:

Some charge that autoethnographers do too little field work, have small samples, use biased data, are navel-gazers, and are too self-absorbed, offering only verisimilitude, and not analytic insights. Others say it is bad writing. Some contend it reflects the work of a writer who sits in front of a computer, never leaving a book-lined office to confront the real world (see Ellis..2001...). And of course poststructuralists contend that such key terms as experience, voice, presence, and meaning are undertheorized...Autoethnography cannot be judged by traditional positivist criteria. The goal is not to produce a standard social science article. The goal is to write performance texts in a way that moves others to ethical action. (p. 70)

Autoethnographers who write evocatively aim to realize a truth-of-self through the stories they tell that point to a bigger life issue. The need to tell stories—or to write about stories or to read about stories—is fundamental to the experience of being human. Evocative autoethnographers write to move others emotionally; they write stories to inspire, to anger, to break hearts. How, exactly, does this type of writing get accomplished? That’s what I intend to discover.

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I find myself returning to the Denzin quote. *Some charge that autoethnographers do too little field work, have small samples, use biased data, are navel-gazers, and are too self-absorbed...* Is autoethnography an inherently narcissistic venture? Can its key terms, experience, voice, presence, and meaning, be theorized and explained? Is that even my goal? What I want is a praxis, a practical knowledge of how evocative autoethnography gets written. I want to stand alongside the writer and experience the process. There’s more than one way of knowing, Sarah Wall’s 2006 article reminds me. It’s alright to deviate from “the dominant scientific paradigm”. There’s room for autoethnography—for research into one’s culture and self; there’s a need to “create a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned” (p. 3). That’s good news for my project. But how do I go about writing this research down and writing this research up? To answer this question, I turn to the late poet and compositionist Wendy Bishop. She wrote extensively about the benefits of utilizing ethnography in the composition classroom in the early

nineties. Even though her work was published decades ago, the points she makes are relevant to the concerns of my autoethnography. She discusses, for instance, in her 1992 article, “I-witnessing in composition: Turning ethnographic data into narratives” (pp. 150-151) the problems she encountered with writing data down and writing data up. Her struggle with writing ethnography and using it in the composition classroom came down to what she calls “cool style” versus “warm style.” Traditional science writing—writing that’s considered objective, valid, and authoritative—is written in a “cool style,” a style which “appeals to reason” (p. 150). Ethnography, and by extension autoethnography, is written in a “warm style,” a style which relies on “vivid subjective narratives that are, inevitably, meditative and interpretive. These narratives, of course, rely greatly upon the ethos of the author.”

Back to my question, my concern. The writing up and writing down of autoethnographic research. Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Art Bochner (2011) offer me answers. First, autoethnographers, the authors suggest, should “seek to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (p. 14). But what does an “evocative thick description” look like? I find it helpful to go back to the source—to Clifford Geertz’s work, specifically, and analyze his example. Simply put, thick descriptions elaborate and describe and put the reader alongside the writer. Consider the thick description Geertz included in Chapter 15: Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Geertz opens the chapter with the following paragraph (p. 412):

Early in April of 1958, my wife and I arrived, malarial and diffident, in a Balinese village we intended, as anthropologists, to study. A small place,

about five hundred people, and relatively remote, it was its own world. We were intruders, professional ones, and the villagers dealt with us as Balinese seem always to deal with people not part of their life who yet press themselves upon them: as though we were not there. For them, and to a degree for ourselves, we were nonpersons, specters, invisible men.

Notice Geertz's use of nouns and adjectives to set the mood of the scene. He and his wife were "malarial and diffident." Here we, as the reader, are drawn into the state of the Geertz's personal health and relationship status. To be malarial is to suffer from chills and fever; to be malarial is to be miserable. To be diffident is to be careful or unsure of oneself. With a single adjective, Geertz allows the reader to experience the feelings of he and his wife. In the next sentence, Geertz tells the reader that the "remote village" was "its own world." He could have ended the sentence with "remote," but he decided, very intentionally, to offer a description of the village that would set us up for his outsider status in the remainder of the paragraph. He and his wife were intruders, "nonpersons, specters, invisible." And it only took 88 words to transport the reader into this Balinese village. Thus, from a writerly perspective, a thick description depends upon carefully crafted sentences meant to elicit a mood (foreboding in this case) and to establish the relationship the researcher has to his or her participants.

Thin descriptions, conversely, state the facts, like the results of a survey. If we were to rewrite Geertz's opening paragraph using a thin description, we might write:

Early in April of 1958, two anthropologists arrived in a Balinese village of about five hundred people to study Balinese cultural traditions.

In my revised version of Geertz's paragraph, I eliminate his introspection. Gone are the details about his health and attitude. Gone are his impressions of how the Balinese received his visit. I've erased the fact that his wife was also an anthropologist. A fact that would have been interesting to note during this time period and in this particular location in the world.

Geertz's Balinese essay excerpt is a deceptively forthright example of how the hard work of thick description gets accomplished. Thick description is one technique a writer can use when conveying his or her true story in autoethnography. "In telling the story," sociologist Laurel Richardson suggests (2000, p. 11), "the writer calls upon such fiction-writing techniques as dramatic recall, strong imagery, fleshed-out characters, unusual phrasings, puns, subtexts, allusions. the flashback, the flashforward, tone shifts. synecdoche, dialogue, and interior monologue." These techniques, Richardson asserts, permit readers to "emotionally 'relive' the events with the writer."

I'm skeptical of texts that claim to emotionally offer readers the opportunity to relive a "true" event. What's "truth," anyway? Aren't stories told and retold according to the biases of the narrator? Even simple stories based on events a group of people experience together can differ dramatically. I think of the writing exercise I read about in Mary Karr's *The Art of Memoir*:

On the first day of a memoir class, I often try to douse my students' flaming certainty about the unassailability of their memories. Usually I fake a fight with a colleague— prof or student— while a videographer whirs in back. Then the class is asked to record right after the event what happened...You'd guess



that these bright, mostly young, fairly sensitive witnesses would nail the event down... And yet around the room, with each student reading from spiral notebook or legal pad the mistakes pop up like dandelion greens.

Each student offers a different story of the event they all witnessed minutes before. The students, just as anyone else who writes about themselves and other people, project their own biases and experiences upon the event they witnessed. Is one student's account more objective than the other? Is objectivity even a reasonable goal? No matter how assiduously a writer or anthropologist or journalist or scholar attempts to gather the facts of an event or experience, these facts will never offer one definitive story.

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Mrs. Tan can relate. Let me explain.

In the mid-1990s anthropologist Margery Wolf examined the many ways in which a story about a single event could be told. Wolf recounts the story of a young Taiwanese mother, Mrs. Tan, who, after having three children, becomes suicidal in *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility*. Some of the local villagers of Peihotien whom Wolf interviewed and observed, alongside her husband (at the time Wolf was a field assistant and her husband was the anthropologist heading the study), speculated that evil spirits were to blame for Mrs. Tan's erratic behavior. Other villagers believed Mrs. Tan was a shaman. The only consensus Wolf could obtain was that no one in the village agreed on why the young mother acted in the manner she did.

Wolf examines the woman's story in three texts: a short story (which Wolf wrote when she was doing fieldwork in 1960), unedited field notes collected on-site in Taiwan by Wolf and her colleagues, and a research article Wolf wrote three decades after her time in Taiwan. Which version tells us the most about the woman's experiences and her culture? The woman herself was not interviewed, thus neither Wolf nor the villagers who were willing to speak to Wolf (an important caveat in this type of research) heard the story from Mrs. Tan's perspective.

Wolf explores the implications of her texts in subsequent reflective commentary. She concludes that more experimental ethnographic texts (e.g., her short story) pose a threat to the integrity of her field. "It seems to me," she writes (pp. 59-60), "that if the firm boundaries between fiction and ethnography are allowed to blur, we weaken the value of ethnographic research and gain little in exchange. We will have blurred the ethical assumptions of our craft, and our audience may come to wonder whether we have in any particular instance sacrificed a set of observations in order to preserve a mood or advance the plot—in other words, given precedence to form over content." Are the boundaries between fiction and ethnography, or fiction and nonfiction for that matter, as firm as Wolf suggests?

Nonfiction presents its own complications and problems. Case in point: Wolf's second text, the field notes. The field notes offer a messy glimpse into the villager's reactions, observations, and opinions about Mrs. Tan, the young mother who is the topic of the book. The notes, around 1200 for the entire project, were originally typed on "grubby 5x8 cards, splattered in places with the juicier parts of insects" (p. 84). Wolf selects ten of these field notes to include in her second text. She reprints the

notes as they appeared on the notecards: the chronology is out of order; the events and people described in the notes are confusing. She leaves it up to the reader to determine what happened to the young mother. Many of her field notes depended on her interpreter, Wu Chieh. One of the problems with working with an interpreter is the likelihood that the interpreter will pick and choose what to describe. Wu Chieh frequently “chose the topic she thought we [Wolf and her colleagues] should be attending to and pulled us into it, willy nilly.” (p. 85) Wolf explains that it is difficult to understand many of the notes because contextual observations were not included. These notes represent bits and pieces of the truth, but they are by no means clear cut—nor do they offer a definitive version of what happened to Mrs. Tan.

The third text, a research article Wolf published in *American Ethnologist*, represents the point of view that is closest to Wolf in her professional life. She wrote and published the article thirty years after she wrote her short story and collected her field notes. Wolf uses her research article as a means to discuss three areas of concern important to her work as a feminist anthropologist: audience, authorship, and the selection of research topics. Under the category of “authorship” she argues that anthropologists read ethnographies for the content and not for style. But are anthropologists the only readers interested in this type of work? Clearly not. “Authorship” implies ownership of the text. Is it the paternal ethnographer’s voice? The post-colonialist wanting to drown out the Other? As for the “selection of research topics,” the question is who gets to choose? The informant or the researcher? What about practicality? Wolf ends her reflection of the third text with this thought: “There may be no absolute, complete, universal or eternal truth, and

thus far feminist anthropologists have undermined an impressive number of formerly true stories. It is essential that we continue wherever and however we can to revise old truths, but it is also essential that we begin to construct new, less false stories” (p. 126). Constructing a new and less false story of new motherhood—now that’s something to consider.

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My anxiety about sharing my experiences with new motherhood is starting to get the best of me. I must protect myself from the unknown, from being exposed. I’m like an oyster dying in the arms of a starfish. The starfish, explains MFK Fisher, one of my favorite writers, in *Consider the Oyster*, “wraps arms about the oyster like a hideous lover and forces its shell apart steadily and then thrusts her stomach into it and digests it. The picture is ugly. The oyster is left bare as any empty shell, and the starfish floats on, hungry still” (p. 6). I’m gutless, an empty shell. I recognize that I have to open myself up to danger if I want to write honestly.

Motherhood is close to me; by the time I finish this dissertation my daughter will be two years and eight months old. I started writing my field notes and collecting my data when she was an infant. Of the autoethnographies I’ve read that deal exclusively with motherhood, none were written as a new mother about new motherhood. There’s Tessa Muncey’s article, “Doing Autoethnography” that utilizes experimental prose to convey her experiences as a teen mom. She writes about her experiences decades after she first became a mother. There’s Sarah Wall’s article, “Easier Said Than Done: Writing an Autoethnography” that powerfully explores her decision to adopt a child. Patty Sotirin wrote her autoethnographies when her

children were older—around 9 and 13—she has distance and perspective—as do the other scholars I’ve mentioned. Three fairly recent dissertations are also worth noting. Barbary Lee Murray’s *Secrets of Motherhood*; Sarah Waddell’s *An Autoethnography of a Mother and Educational Leader*; Tammy S. Bird’s *Blogging Through my Son’s Incarceration: An Autoethnography Exploring Voice and Power in an Online Space*. These mothers and scholars tell their stories about motherhood, but motherhood is an expansive terrain. Each scholar chooses to tell her story differently, which is expected but frustrating. Expected because personal stories are unique to the storyteller—no woman has the same story to share about motherhood. Frustrating because it’s hard for me to decide how best to tell my story.

I notice a gap, a blank space. I’m unlike the mothers in the autoethnographies I’ve read. I am someone whose academic background is in the social sciences, yet I’m not a social scientist. I’m a writer with a scholarly slant.

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*Focusing on the -graphy*

*Thursday, July 26, 2012*

*Ephesus, Turkey*

*Library of Celsus*

I’m wearing a white and gold summer cardigan, a garment most people would reconsider wearing in hot weather, and an ankle length Caribbean blue maxi dress. I bought a straw fedora with a black band just a few minutes ago at a tacky tourist vendor cart because my scalp was sunburned. I accepted as a teenager that I was

no Alectrona—the illustrious Greek sun goddess, daughter of Helios and Rhode. I notice the skin along my collarbone is already turning hot pink. I wipe dust the color of snow away from my eyes. I'm one of at least five hundred people clamoring for my turn to behold the ancient Library of Celsus. I stumble down a hill and push strangers' arms and legs and elbows away before I relevé in my sandals for a closer look. Built between 117 AD - 120 AD, the library stands two stories tall. Twelve thousand scrolls used to dwell inside this grand structure. I imagine what it must have been like for scholars to write their ideas, their hypotheses, their legacies on a sprawling roll of papyrus or parchment paper. To write, to record, the act of *graphia*, while not without its ancient critics, is a powerful and enduring endeavor.

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*Graphia* and *-graphy*, that's the word and suffix invading my thoughts today. I'm holding a thirty-year-old copy of *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* edited by James Clifford and George Marcus. The book is worn and fragile. I use masking tape to keep the book's cover from falling off so I can read the interior book jacket blurb:

Why have ethnographic accounts recently lost so much of their authority? Why were they ever believable? Who has the right to challenge an "objective" cultural description? Was Margaret Mead simply wrong about Samoa as has recently been claimed? Or was her image of an exotic land a partial truth reflecting the concerns of her time and a complex encounter with Samoans? Are not all ethnographies rhetorical performances determined by the need to

tell an effective story? Can the claims of ideology and desire ever be fully reconciled with the needs of theory and observation?

Here's yet another source that isn't certain about truth or believability or how writing about people and culture should be expressed. I'm irritated, annoyed. So I do the reasonable thing: I google. I stumble across Cecilia Ballí's class syllabus for "Creative Nonfiction and Ethnography." Ballí is a published writer and professor of cultural anthropology at The University of Texas. I scan her course description and I swear she's talking directly to me as I read this paragraph:

Much hand-wringing has dominated anthropology throughout the past twenty-five years as practitioners became absorbed with the fact that all ethnographies are texts, literary representations of sorts. Saddled with worry, even guilt about what this implies for our "science," many ethnographers have become less compelling and effective writers, even as other scholars have rushed to embrace the method, and as narrative journalists have churned out stories that reach broader audiences. This course seeks to begin to redress that imbalance by asking students to reach precisely toward literary practices to make ethnography fresh, original and publicly relevant. It recenters writing so that it is no longer just our product, but our reason for being.

Haven't I wrung my hands in consternation for long enough? Why justify or defend the "science" of ethnography or autoethnography when I can write something that's not merely a product, but a reason for being?

And subversive. “Ethnography is subversive—it challenges the dominant positivist view of making knowledge,” writes Wendy Bishop in “I-witnessing in composition: Turning ethnographic data into narratives.” She continues, “It demands attention to human subjectivity and allows for author-saturated reconstructions and examinations of a world; in fact, it is grounded by definition in phenomenological understanding of knowledge and meaning-making. Equally, it is generative and creative because writing research ethnographies are overtly rhetorical; they are producing informed stories and arguments about the world” (p. 153).

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*Thursday, March 31, 2016*

*6:00 p.m.*

*My kitchen*

Madeleine throws the jasmine rice I cooked for her tonight on the floor. Our dog hovers underneath her highchair. “Here, try it,” she says as the dog licks the rice from her fingers. I pick up the rice and shoo the dog away from the kitchen. And I start thinking about Ellis and Bishop. The personal. The cultural. Informed stories about the world. What do I mean when I refer to new motherhood as its own culture?

Let me tell you a story to explain.

It was a slight of hand, a trickery that almost landed us in a Chinese jail. We—my professor and the group of ESL teachers-in-training I’d joined for a summer internship—spent the day lingering in the lush gardens of the Summer Palace in Beijing. As we left the Summer Palace, my professor bought a set of chopsticks from



a local vendor—a man with a gentle smile and slight build—that were onyx with an ivory inlay. The man gave her change and we left with Kunming Lake shimmering in the distance. At lunch, when we paid, the waiter came to our table yelling at us in Chinese. The bill my professor had used to buy us lunch was a fake. One minute we were tourists; the next, criminals. My professor brought a friend with her—a woman from Beijing—and she explained to the waiter that we'd been fooled. It took 10 long minutes to convince him to put down the phone and refrain from calling the police. We should have recognized the vendor's treachery. But we misread the cues; we misread the culture.

Isn't entering into the culture of new motherhood a bit like that? A magician's trick; a counterfeit bill. Culture is what we can observe—dress, language, rituals, customs. Culture is what we internalize in our minds. It shapes us, we shape it; we shape it, it shapes us—no one really knows the order for certain. In my view, culture connects the self to others with whom one shares social, physical, and psychic space.

I'll give you a specific example.

The morning my pregnancy test wand began to turn pink, the years I'd spent agonizing over that moment dissipated; my anguish transformed into a whirling dervish of emotion: relief, terror, happiness, confusion. In the few minutes it took the urine soaked pregnancy stick to report its results, everything changed. My body belonged to the two of us now, my daughter and me. I entered new territory, a foreign land. I immediately started living differently, down to the most basic details of

my life: my diet, my sleeping habits, my reading interests, my priorities. I remember ordering a spinach salad for lunch that day at a local sandwich shop because Google told me iron was good for my new fetus. I stopped my six-cups-of-coffee-a-day habit; I went to bed early and stopped working so much; I stopped drinking. I bought prenatal vitamins. I read mommy blogs. I no longer lived my life the way I had before. After my daughter was born, I cut my long, blonde hair and dyed it brown. I wore yoga pants full-time. I constantly read mommy forums online for advice. I called myself a mommy. I looked to those who had come before me to answer my questions: *Am I doing this right? Am I a good mom? Am I like other moms? Is this how I'm supposed to behave? To feel? Is this what I'm supposed to do? Is this how I'm supposed to be?* I wanted to get “this” right—this force of nature called new motherhood.

But in many respects, I was lost. I was a foreigner who didn't speak the language, who didn't know the customs, who didn't know how to recognize a counterfeit bill when it was resting in my palm. My husband changed too, but not like me. He wasn't expected to wear certain clothes, become an instant expert on breastfeeding and newborn sleeping habits, or choose between career or family. He didn't have to worry about hiring a babysitter every time he wanted to run an errand in peace or finish a work-related project. He didn't ask himself “Is this all?” Those expectations—those cultural expectations—belonged to me, the new mother. New motherhood is an island. Its own world.

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*Friday, April 8, 2016*

*8:32 a.m.*

*Daycare parking lot*

I overslept this morning and Madeleine and I are running late. I'm exhausted and nervous and a general basket case over finishing this dissertation draft. I woke up at exactly 3:52 a.m. today (and yesterday and the day before that). Nerves. Madeleine is wearing an electric blue bathing suit cover-up with neon orange and yellow hibiscus flowers over her powder pink and polka dot long sleeved shirt. I won the battle of the pants—it's 45 degrees outside—but I've lost the battle of the shirt. In my haste to fill her hot pink sippy cup with ice and filtered water ("Ice waters, Mommy! Pink ice waters!") before we left for daycare drop-off, I forgot to close the cup securely. We're in the daycare parking lot and neither of us realizes that the sippy cup is leaking inside her lunchbox. I walk Madeleine to her classroom and finally notice the baseball-sized water spot on the left side of my pants. Her teacher helps me clean up the mess (the lunchbox is drenched and water leaks everywhere) and I get to thinking about how effortlessly the water flowed from the cup. It reminds me of what it was like writing my birth story, which is an odd connection to make, I know. My birth story, like all birth stories, has a clear beginning, middle, and end. The story fits neatly into a traditional narrative structure, one with scenes and plot and characterization and dialog.

But what about my experiences with new motherhood that do not fit neatly into a traditional story structure? Do I exclude those from my autoethnography? I return to a chapter about writing autoethnography in Heewon Chang's

*Autoethnography as Method*. She proposes a typology for autoethnographic writing (pp. 141-145) that includes the various strategies writers implore when writing up their research: Descriptive-Realistic Writing, Confessional-Emotive Writing, Analytical-Interpretive Writing, and Imaginative-Creative Writing. She ends the chapter with the suggestion that none of these strategies may work for the writer—developing one’s own style is an acceptable option. I realize I’m somewhere on the Confessional-Emotive and Imaginative-Creative spectrum, but that’s hardly a writing style.

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*Monday, July 6, 2015 - Sunday, August, 2, 2015*

*Experimental Forms in Creative Nonfiction*

*Online Course*

I’ve taken several online creative writing classes over the years for fun: food writing, fiction writing, poetry, memoir writing, fundamentals of Creative Nonfiction. I enjoy the anonymity and the lack of pandering and posturing from my peers. Graduate students are competitive and I find it difficult to grow as a writer when I’m unsure of myself and have to worry about what my peers will think of me and my work. During the first trimester of my pregnancy I took an in person Creative Nonfiction workshop at my university. The class was a positive experience overall, but I craved the freedom online learning provides. So here I am in Experimental Forms. I came to the class with a taste for flash nonfiction. Flash nonfiction reads, to

me, similarly to poetry. Every word counts and contributes to the miniature world the writer presents on the page. Flash focuses on a moment, a pulse, in 1500 words or fewer. Dinty Moore, the editor and founder of *Brevity* magazine, explains<sup>10</sup> that, “In a shorter piece, much depends on the close attention the writer pays to detail and language. The tension of tones and personas competing for space demands that the writer stay in the moment—the lyric moment where concrete details, the careful arrangement of words, tone, and voice are so crucial to its success.” Locating “the lyric moment” is a skill, an art, and a craft.

In *Experimental Forms*, we write micro essays of 500 words which helps us practice finding our lyric moment. We learn about non-linear chronology in storytelling and non-standard narrative perspectives. We study and practice writing hybrid forms—essays that incorporate other genres like diaries or newspaper articles or poems. Or, in my case, field notes.

A field note, in case you’re wondering, is a researcher’s detailed observations of the participants he or she studies. I’ve had to put myself in a strange frame of mind in order to write my field notes these last two years. I recall my days in linguistics when I’d design and conduct studies based on observations and interviews. I imagine what I’d do as a researcher who observed a new mother every day. What are her daily activities? Where does she carry out these activities? What does she think about her life now that she’s a mother? These are the questions

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<sup>10</sup> See Moore, Dinty W. *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction: Advice and Essential Exercises from Respected Writers, Editors, and Teachers* (Kindle Locations 1477-1480). Rose Metal Press. Kindle Edition. 2012

running through my mind as I write my notes. But I get the benefit of knowing the participant's innermost thoughts and feelings. And these observations—both internal and external—are revealing a fragmented story. I've started working through my field notes—searching for trends. I see insecurity, depression, darkness. I see unbridled joy, delight, and expressions of a love that's pure. What I *don't* see is an opportunity to write about these experiences in the format of a traditional story. I have to find another way; I must determine other possibilities. I must face the unknown, the in between.

## SECTION II

### THE IN BETWEEN

#### Essays and Reflections

Flash nonfiction, unlike its long-form companions, demands “an alertness to detail, a quickening of the senses, a focusing of the literary lens ... until one has magnified some small aspect of what it means to be human.”<sup>11</sup> *A quickening of the senses*. The senses are new motherhood’s home. Caring for an infant demands constant physical contact. A continual awareness of the body. The morning I held my newborn daughter in my arms, I inhaled her warmth. I exhaled her heartbeat. I surrendered to her scent, luscious like heavy cream and butter swirling in a pot over a high flame, vapors of fat nestling inside my nose. My fingertips brushed her velvet cheek. She glistened. Her lips were pink peony petals. Her head plush like an overripe peach. Her eyes a crystal sea.

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<sup>11</sup> See Moore, Dinty W. *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction: Advice and Essential Exercises from Respected Writers, Editors, and Teachers* (Kindle Locations 109-110). Rose Metal Press. Kindle Edition. 2012

My daughter's infancy resides in my senses. Our nights, our mornings, our afternoons are etched on my palms, my chest. My skin remembers her laugh, her snores. My stomach pounds when she's sick; my sternum tightens when she's afraid. Decades from today, it's not the fuzzy recollections of her babyhood I'll miss. I'll miss hearing her say, "momma." I'll miss seeing her rambling first steps. Decades from today, my daughter might recall the bergamot from my perfume. She might hear the click-clack-click of my high heels on the maple floors of her childhood home. These sensory memories, these specific details we see, taste, touch, hear, and smell, inhabit our bodies. They shape who we are; they define how we remember our lives. Our senses remember when our brains fail us. For these reasons, I have arranged the 23 flash essays that appear in the second part of this dissertation according to the senses. In addition, I have included commentary after each flash essay that I call "reflections."

"In flash nonfiction," Dinty Moore writes in *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*, "there's often not enough time and space to rely on the reflective voice common to longer pieces—that voice that creates the meaning as the writer considers, questions, speculates."<sup>12</sup> These reflective pieces provide a voice—an additional sense of understanding that opens a space for further contemplation.

The view I present of the many iterations of myself in the flash pieces is shattered. It reminds me of an emerald green glass vase that slipped from my

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<sup>12</sup> Moore, Dinty W. *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction: Advice and Essential Exercises from Respected Writers, Editors, and Teachers* (Kindle Locations 1477-1480). Rose Metal Press. Kindle Edition. 2012



hands once when I was opening wedding presents a decade ago. I looked at the shattered pieces in horror as they covered the floor. I vacuumed and I swept and I plucked pieces of glass the size of a needle's eye from my fingers. The vase was no longer the vase it was. The vase shifted its shape; the vase developed a different point of view. The flash essays and the reflective commentary work together in order to illuminate the scattershot experiences one mother has had in the broader cultural milieu of motherhood.



**SIGHT**

**BLIND**

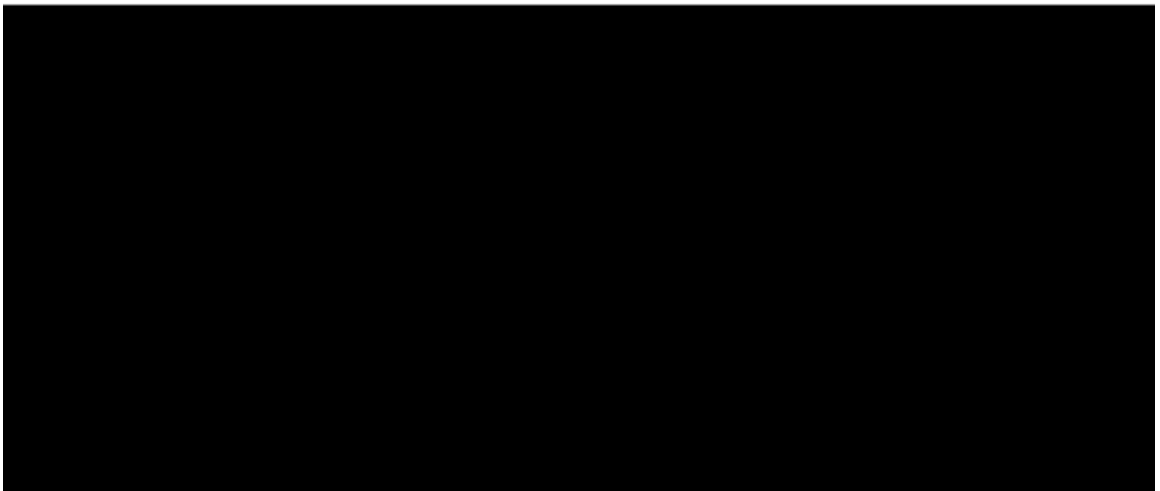
With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -  
Between the light - and me -  
And then the Windows failed - and then  
I could not see to see -

Emily Dickinson

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died

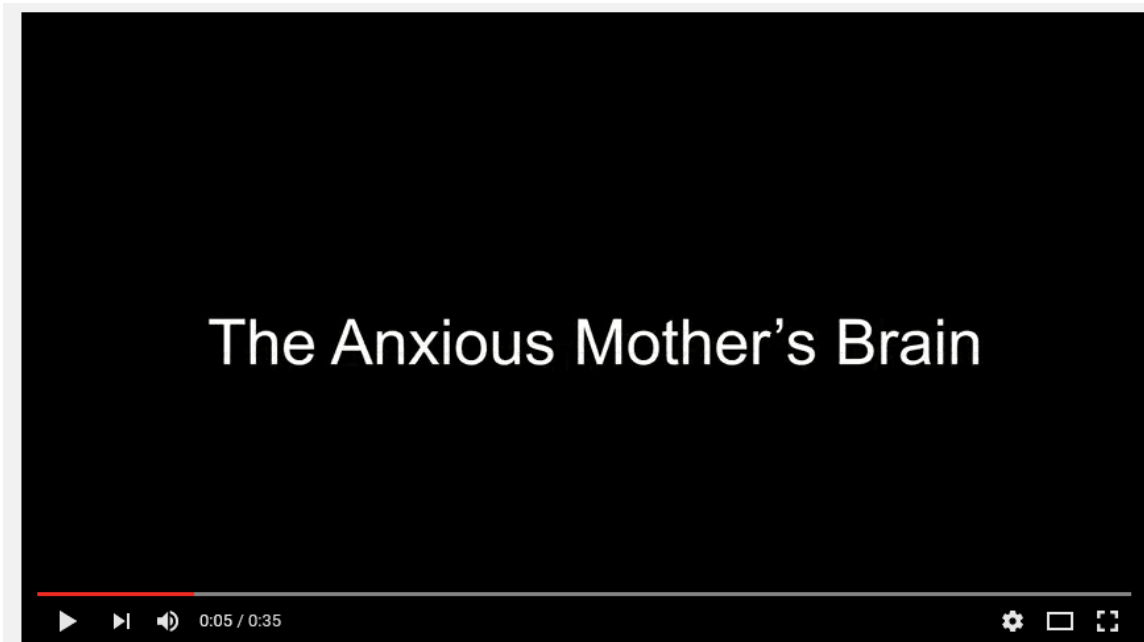


# **SIGHT**



# THE ANXIOUS MOTHER'S BRAIN

A BRIEF FILM



*Screen shot of the film I created. Scan the QR code with cell phone to view.*

THE ANXIOUS MOTHER'S BRAIN  
REFLECTIONS

*Friday, July 8, 2016*

*9:30 a.m.*

*Interview with my therapist*

I press a porcelain cup of freshly brewed coffee to my lips. Its heady aroma, earthy and rich, triggers a memory from four years ago. I'm sitting in a stately brown leather chair, shivering, despite the summer heat. My breath quickens. My legs shake. I stink. I itch. I want to peel my skin off my body. I hear my name called. Therapy. That's why I am in this office. I cannot go to a hospital or a doctor's office without hyperventilating. My husband and I want to have a baby, but I cannot physically handle my anxiety about pregnancy and childbirth. It's a problem. A marital deal breaker.

I needed help. But I didn't want to ask for it.

\*\*\*\*

I hear three gentle knocks on my front door. She's here. My former therapist (I'll call her L) and I have kept in touch since our weekly sessions concluded in 2013. I put my coffee cup down on the kitchen counter and let her inside. I've asked L over to catch up and to talk about motherhood. I wouldn't have become a mother without her guidance. We talk about how far I've come from the anxious wreck I was when we started therapy together. We talk about

motherhood, generalized anxiety disorder, parenting. The interview takes place at my kitchen table.

INTERVIEWER

Let me show you the short film I created, "The Anxious Mother's Brain."

THERAPIST

OK.

(We watch the film together.)

INTERVIEWER

I looked at multiple science articles and psychology articles. At first, I started to write a traditional academic essay about Generalized Anxiety Disorder and I thought, 'this isn't what it feels like.' If I use this more experimental approach I want a different way to show what anxiety disorders are like. So that's where I got all of these different sentences here (points to the last frame of the video). The thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions one has to Generalized Anxiety Disorder. And then I used the negative space with the black background and with the stark white images that are deconstructed to represent the void that GAD causes. What did you think of the white against the black? The simple imagery?

## THERAPIST

I liked it. The simplicity. The amygdala of the brain is where emotions are stored. And that's in the mid-brain, which is the mammalian part of the brain we first developed as humans. That's where emotions were, the connection, the attachment. It's where we became emotional beings. Anxiety in particular is a disorder that gets triggered by the frontal lobe of the brain. When you talk to yourself and you worry, it's the frontal part of the brain that connects to the amygdala. And we probably talked about this in therapy, but the neural pathways connect the worried thoughts to the emotional part of our brains and the amygdala doesn't know if the worried thought is a real threat or not, so it goes into that "fight of flight" kind of survival mode. Then it triggers all of the chemicals that cause your body to become aroused. And, so, I don't know if you remember when we did the EMDR?<sup>13</sup> What happens in the brain with the EMDR is it transfers the memories that are stored in the amygdala, which is on the right side of the brain, the emotional part, the intuitive part, to the other hemisphere, which is the rational part of the brain. So it transfers that information to the other half of the brain and it calms the amygdala down. All of that emotion is transferred, and it makes sense, then, to the brain. People say, 'I feel these things, but I don't have a way to explain what I'm feeling.'

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<sup>13</sup> Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy



## INTERVIEWER

Yeah, the physical reaction to anxiety is intense. I get so shaky and have trouble speaking. It's terrible.

## THERAPIST

And that's what happens with our bodies. We tell us things in our heads. Those "what if" thoughts. The body doesn't know if it's a real danger or not. It just knows that something bad is going to happen. So part of the therapy that we did helped you identify the thoughts that were rational versus irrational. And begin to tell yourself something different or use techniques to calm yourself down, like the breathing and the getting grounded that you did with your journaling. It changes the thoughts and then your body calms down. So when you showed the amygdala in your video I thought that's right on target. Because that's the site of emotions in the brain. And that's the site that particularly people who have anxiety disorders, that's what gets affected the most.

## INTERVIEWER

And anxiety can be hard to write about. It's hard to portray, textually, what it's like because it's such a physical thing. I almost felt disembodied when I'd try to write about my anxiety disorder. Just not attached to myself because of the physical reactions from my overactive amygdala. So that was another reason I created the Anxious Mother's Brain in images versus narration.

THERAPIST

Right.

INTERVIEWER

Ok, so I'm going to shift topics a little here. I'm sure many new mothers feel anxious.

THERAPIST

Of course.

INTERVIEWER

With that in mind, what advice would you give to new mothers who have difficulty asking for help?

THERAPIST

Know the kind of person you are. Because that's not going to change.

INTERVIEWER

How do I know what kind of person I am? How do I recognize the aspects of myself that I cannot alter?

THERAPIST

Listen to your own voice. Your voice is going to tell you what kind of person you are. And that's not going to change. Baby or no baby. If you've always been a person who was more anxious and more introverted, then

recognize that. Honor that and feel compassion towards yourself rather than judging yourself about it.

#### INTERVIEWER

I definitely didn't have compassion for myself in the beginning as a new mother. I thought I was defective because I had difficulty connecting with other moms. I felt so isolated. Like there was no one out there I could relate to or befriend. And I blamed myself for my isolation. Yet, I couldn't make myself leave the house and meet people even though I was very lonely.

#### THERAPIST

But knowing that about yourself gives you permission to say, 'That isn't for me and that's ok. And it's ok if I don't do that. And I may do it differently. I can do it by meeting people one by one and then taking another step to connect with others in a way that makes me feel comfortable.'

#### INTERVIEWER

That's great advice. A good mantra. Thank you. For everything.

## THE BIRTH OF MOTHER MONSTER

### I. Conception

#### *The Maternal Imagination*

In the 16th-18th centuries, scientists believed that a woman's thoughts determined the physical appearance of her baby.

Pierre Boaistuau, a 16<sup>th</sup> century French writer, documented such abnormalities in *Histoires Prodigieuses*. He wrote about a girl who resembled a sasquatch. During the mother's conception of the girl, scientists determined that the woman lusted after the effigy of St. John near her bed. Her eyes met his eyes. Good St. John adorned in his feral animal skins. A wild lover in the mother's imagination.

#### *Mother Monster Manifesto*

Lady Gaga started calling herself Mother Monster in 2009. Some say she stole the idea from a fan. She recited the Mother Monster Manifesto before her music video Born This Way.

### II. Gestation

#### *Sincerely, Susan*

"I am not the monster society thinks I am. I am far from it," writes Susan Smith in a letter to journalists twenty years after she murdered her sons.

On October 25, 1994 she strapped her two young sons, ages 14 months and 3 years, into her 1990 Mazda Protege and watched it roll into John D. Long Lake.

“Something went very wrong that night. I was not myself,” Smith continued. “I was a good mother and I loved my boys. ... There was no motive as it was not even a planned event. I was not in my right mind.”

Smith’s letter concludes with a cordial valediction. Succinct. Un-monster like.

Sincerely,

Susan

Queen Gertrude

Queen Gertrude tells Laertes, Ophelia’s brother, his sister has drowned.

The Stepmother, Evil One, in The Juniper Tree

Once upon a time there lived an evil stepmother called Evil One. One afternoon, she cooked a stew. First, she minced her stepson’s toothpick arms and shoestring legs with her husband’s favorite butcher knife. Next, she sprinkled the boy in a pot along with carrots and celery and broth. Finally, Evil One plunged her finger into the broth and brought it to her mouth. She smacked her lips and said to Marlene, the boy’s sister, “Thanks to your tears, we don’t need any salt.”

### III. Birth

#### *A Natural Born Mother*

Some women were born to be mothers.

Some mothers were born to be monsters.

Andrea Yates drowned her five children in the bathtub.

Noah Jacob, February 26, 1994-June 20, 2001, age 7

John Samuel, December 15, 1995-June 20, 2001, age 5

Paul Abraham, September 13, 1997-June 20, 2001, age 3

Luke David, February 15, 1999-June 20, 2001, age 2

Mary Deborah, November 30, 2000-June 20, 2001, age 6 months

On February 6, 2006, twenty days before her oldest son, Noah, would have turned 12, Andrea Yates was released from prison.

Not Guilty By Reason of Insanity.

### IV. Afterbirth

#### *Medea by Euripides, 431 BCE*

Medea, scorned wife and monstrous mother, with her heart of stone and steel, with her life of sorrow, slayed her sons before reuniting with them in the sea.

# THE BIRTH OF MOTHER MONSTER

## REFLECTIONS

### *Field Note Jottings*

### *On Research and the Collage Essay*

### **Field Note.0058**

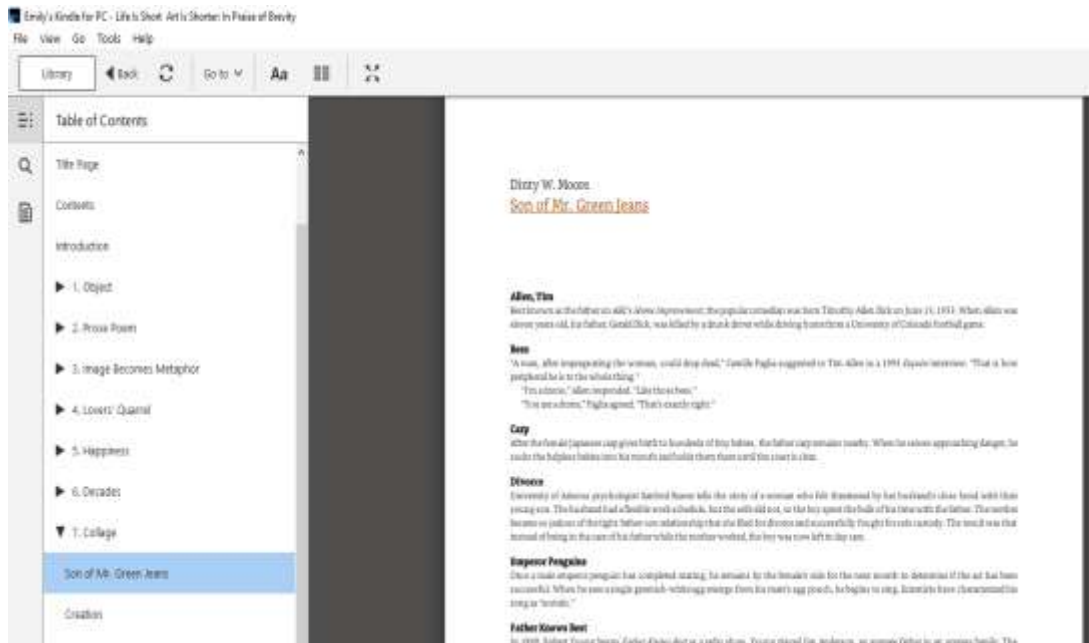
Date: Monday, April 20, 2015

Time: 10:35 a.m.

Location: My home office

Activity: The Birth of Mother Monster—Research for Collage Essay

### *Jottings*



### *Thoughts? Additional Notes? Source(s)?*

- *“Dinty W. Moore’s collage-essay “Son of Mr. Green Jeans,” which appeared in Harper’s as a slightly redacted reprint from its earlier incarnation in Crazyhorse, is better in its later incarnation. In its original form, it feels slightly too long; edited down a bit, it’s exactly the right*

*length. Collage is very much about getting the music right, getting the rhythm right, getting just enough material in just the right juxtaposition that the reader gets how all the pieces come together, but then not belaboring the point. Moore's collage is about a classic ambivalence: a husband's wariness/ reluctance about becoming a father. There are many ways to write about such material: as a traditional essay exploring one's own ambivalence; as a short story perhaps rendered as a series of conversations/ debates/ arguments between husband and wife. Moore chooses to explore his ambivalence or chart his ambivalence, and he works with remarkable concision, precision, and power."*

- See Shields, David; Cooperman, Elizabeth (2015-04-20). *Life Is Short – Art Is Shorter: In Praise of Brevity* (Kindle Locations 2161-2168). Hawthorne Books. Kindle Edition.
- What's the distinction between a good mother and a bad mother? How are so-called monster mothers "born"? How close or far am I—or you—to becoming one?
- I use Moore's essay for inspiration.
- *"In 1,500 words or fewer, compose your own collage. Use any materials you want – fiction, nonfiction, diary entry, email, photo, tweet, text, family album, newspaper caption, dirty joke, etc., etc. The key thing is to organize the material in such a way that the reader, slowly but surely, gets what connects all the materials and gets what you are saying about the material. Picasso: "A great painting comes together, just barely." That's exactly what you want your collage to do – come together, but just barely."*
  - See Shields, David; Cooperman, Elizabeth (2015-04-20). *Life Is Short – Art Is Shorter: In Praise of Brevity* (Kindle Locations 2157-2161). Hawthorne Books. Kindle Edition.
- Collage essays force readers to formulate their own understanding of the text and its layers.



## *On Research and the Maternal Imagination*

### **Field Note.0011**

Date: September 14, 2014

Time: 1:43 p.m.

Location: My home office

Activity: Reading sources about the maternal imagination

### *Jottings*



A third line of thought, apparent from the classical period to the eighteenth century, attributes monsters to disordered "maternal imagination." According to Marie-Hélène Huet, pre-Enlightenment thought held that the natural order of generation called for the father's image to be replicated in his offspring. Malformed children indicated disruptions to the natural process; rather than reproducing the paternal image, they instead bore witness to the intense thoughts and desires of the mother during conception and pregnancy, which physically marked the fetus. To illustrate, Pierre Boaistuau, a sixteenth-century chronicler of monsters and marvels, documented the case of the hairy virgin, a female born covered with thick hair over her entire body (see Figure 1). Her condition was traced to her mother having "gazed too intently" at the moment of conception "upon an effigy of St. John dressed in animal skins which hung at the foot of her bed" (qtd. in Huet 19). The account suggests that the mother's imaginative faculty led her to imprint the image of fur-covered St. John onto the developing fetus, an interpretation that casts the mother as a passive transmitter of visual impressions. However, it also implies that fertile women cannot cloak the workings of their minds: "[T]he monster appears as

### *Thoughts? Additional Notes? Source(s)?*

- Doukas, Georgios. Pierre Boaistuau (c. 1517-1566) and the employment of humanism in mid sixteenth-century France. Diss. University of Birmingham, 2012.
  - See p. 303, Figure 20, picture of a hairy girl. Original source: *Histoires Prodigieuses*
- See also Buchanan, Lindal. "A study of maternal rhetoric: Anne Hutchinson, monsters, and the antinomian controversy." *Rhetoric Review* 25.3 (2006): 239-259. (p. 241)
- On my desk, at this very moment, are stacks of books and journal articles about motherhood. Many of these books and articles share a sinister theme. Mothers—across time and cultures—harbor a capacity for violence. They suppress a capacity for madness—though, some do this better than others. They are monsters. Read enough of these books and articles and you'll begin to wonder if you're more similar to Medea than to Mary.

## Field Note.0060

Date: Monday, April 20, 2015

Time: 1:24 p.m.

Location: My home office

Activity: Reading sources about the maternal imagination

### Jottings

<p>Articles</p> <p>Case law</p> <p>My library</p>	<p><a href="#">Promising monsters: Pregnant bodies, artistic subjectivity, and <b>maternal imagination</b></a> R Betterton - <i>Hypatia</i>, 2006 - Wiley Online Library</p> <p>This paper engages with theories of the monstrous <b>maternal</b> in feminist philosophy to explore how examples of visual art practice by Susan Hiller, Marc Quinn, Alison Lapper, Tracey Emin, and Cindy Sherman disrupt <b>maternal</b> ideals in visual culture through ...</p> <p><a href="#">Cited by 46</a> <a href="#">Related articles</a> <a href="#">All 10 versions</a> <a href="#">Cite</a> <a href="#">Save</a></p>
<p>Any time</p> <p>Since 2016</p> <p>Since 2015</p> <p>Since 2012</p> <p>Custom range...</p>	<p><a href="#">'Out of sight, out of mind?': The Daniel Turner-James Blondel dispute over the power of the <b>maternal imagination</b></a> <span style="float: right;">[PDF] from landfonline.com</span> PK Wilson - <i>Annals of science</i>, 1992 - Taylor &amp; Francis</p> <p>Summary In the late 1720s, Daniel Turner and James Blondel engaged in a pamphlet dispute over the power of the <b>maternal imagination</b>. Turner accepted the long-standing belief that a pregnant woman's <b>imagination</b> could be transferred to her unborn child, ...</p> <p><a href="#">Cited by 28</a> <a href="#">Related articles</a> <a href="#">All 6 versions</a> <a href="#">Cite</a> <a href="#">Save</a> <a href="#">More</a></p>
<p>Sort by relevance</p> <p>Sort by date</p>	<p><a href="#">The <b>Maternal Imagination</b>. The Fears of Pregnant Women in Seventeenth-Cenatry Holland</a> HW Roodenburg - <i>Journal of Social History</i>, 1988 - JSTOR</p> <p>1. Anyone who is in any way familiar with the history of Amsterdam will undoubtedly know the statue, attributed to Quellijn, that once stood on the central courtyard of the city's asylum: the statue of a naked, insane woman whose face is twisted in a mad grin as she tears her ...</p> <p><a href="#">Cited by 23</a> <a href="#">Related articles</a> <a href="#">All 5 versions</a> <a href="#">Cite</a> <a href="#">Save</a></p>
<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> include patents</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> include citations</p>	<p><a href="#">Signs of wonder and traces of doubt: On teratology and embodied differences</a> R Eiraidotti - <i>Feminist theory and the body: A reader</i>, 1999 - books.google.com</p> <p>... In the rest of this chapter, I will concentrate on two themes, the continuity of which in the history of teratological discourses strikes me as particularly significant: the racialization of monstrous bodies and the question of the <b>maternal imagination</b>-race and gender as marks of ...</p> <p><a href="#">Cited by 155</a> <a href="#">Related articles</a> <a href="#">Cite</a> <a href="#">Save</a></p>
<p><input type="checkbox"/> Create alert</p>	<p><a href="#"><b>Maternal imagination</b>: reconceiving first impressions</a> M Shildrick - <i>Rethinking history</i>, 2000 - Taylor &amp; Francis</p> <p>The concept of <b>maternal imagination</b>, whereby the disordered thoughts and impressions of pregnant women are used to explain the prevalence of monstrous births, was at its height during the early modern period, albeit it with many prior and subsequent manifestations. ...</p> <p><a href="#">Cited by 14</a> <a href="#">Related articles</a> <a href="#">All 2 versions</a> <a href="#">Cite</a> <a href="#">Save</a></p>

### Thoughts? Additional Notes? Source(s)?

- Additional sources about the maternal imagination
- The mother exercises no control over her impure thoughts that ultimately determine the appearance of her child.
- Children born with birth defects were considered the evil by-product of the maternal imagination.
- Healthy child = virtuous mother

*On Research and Mothers, Pop Culture*

**Field Note.0061**

Date: Tuesday, April 21, 2015

Time: 9:38 a.m.

Location: My home office

Activity: Reading about mothers in pop culture and monster references

*Jottings*

1,480,000 RESULTS Any time ▾

**Lady Gaga - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother\\_Monster](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Monster) ▾

Concerts performed at Madison Square Garden in New York City were filmed for an HBO television special titled *Lady Gaga Presents the Monster Ball Tour: At ...*

[Life and career](#) · [Artistry](#) · [Public image](#) · [Activism](#) · [Legacy](#) · [Achievements](#)

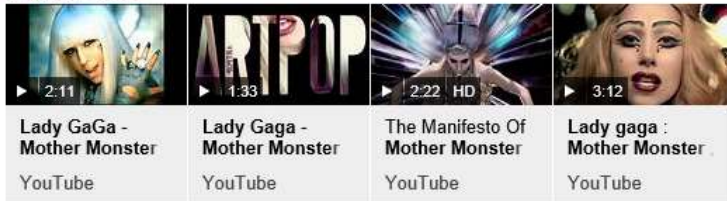
**Manifesto of Mother Monster - Gagapedia - Wikia**

[ladygaga.wikia.com/wiki/Manifesto\\_of\\_Mother\\_Monster](http://ladygaga.wikia.com/wiki/Manifesto_of_Mother_Monster) ▾

The Manifesto of Mother Monster is a speech by Lady Gaga during the music video for "Born This Way". During the reading in the music video, the backtrack played is ...

**Videos of lady gaga mother monster**

[bing.com/videos](http://bing.com/videos)



*Thoughts? Additional Notes? Source(s)?*

- Google search: "Lady Gaga, mother, monster"
- Lady Gaga chooses to name herself Mother Monster.

**Field Note.0062**

Date: Wednesday, April 22, 2015

Time: 12:02 p.m.

Location: My home office

Activity: Reading about mothers as monsters

*Jottings*

range in extremity from birthmarks to missing or misplaced limbs. This section introduces three frameworks for understanding monsters (providence, science, and maternal imagination) that later illuminate Hutchinson's and Dyer's misbirths. It also examines how malformed beings have been used rhetorically to construct religious, political, and gendered arguments.

Ancient myths and legends are peopled with monsters like the half-human/half-bull Minotaur, one-eyed Cyclops, snake-haired Medusa, and nine-headed Hydra. Such creatures' anomalies were commonly attributed to god(s) and interpreted variously as signs of divine parentage, umbrage, or reward. Clearly, monsters have long been associated with the supernatural, a line of thinking I term "providential." Providential interpretations of monsters predominated from the classical period until the end of the sixteenth century, detailed in works by Cicero, Augustine, and Isidore of Seville (Thompson 17; Park and Daston 23). Depending upon the time period, monstrous births might be read as embodiments of the divine, as good or bad omens of the future, or as indications of God's will or wrath.

A second persistent line of thinking is the "scientific." It too originated in the classical period with Aristotle's studies, moved forward in the medieval period with Albertus Magnus's work, developed in the early modern period through Francis Bacon's and the Royal Academy's investigations, and eventually evolved into the fields of genetics and embryology (see Park and Daston; Huet). The scientific framework has been dominant since the Enlightenment and has encouraged the search for natural, rather than supernatural, causes of monstrous births.

*Thoughts? Additional Notes? Source(s)?*

- See Buchanan, Lindal. "A study of maternal rhetoric: Anne Hutchinson, monsters, and the antinomian controversy." *Rhetoric Review* 25.3 (2006): 239-259. (p. 241)
- I read this source last year for another paper. Re-reading today.

## Field Note.0059

Date: Monday, April 20, 2015

Time: 12:47 p.m.

Location: My home office

Activity: Researching key terms about mothers and monsters for contemporary sources

### Jottings

About 38,200,500 results (0.58 seconds)

[Elizabeth Escalona: 'I am a monster': Mother who beat her daughter ...](#)  
www.dailymail.co.uk/.../Elizabeth-Escalona-I-monster-Mother-beat-daught... Daily Mail -  
Oct 12, 2012 - 'I AM a monster' Mother who beat her daughter, two, into a coma and gloed her  
hands to the wall is jailed for 99 years. Elizabeth Escalona, 23 ...

#### Images for monster mothers

Report images



More images for monster mothers

[Mommy Monsters: 10 of the most abusive mothers and their horrific ...](#)  
rightwingnews.com/.../10-of-the-most-abusive-mothers-and-their-horrific-crimes-agal...  
Aug 8, 2014 - Today we will explore some of the worst monster Mommy's crimes in a countdown.  
They are graded by the mothers threshold to repetitively ...

#### 11 Moms Scarier Than the Monster In Your Closet | Investigation ...

[www.investigationanddiscovery.com/murders/videos/monster-moms/](#)  
... no business procreating. Watch video of Monster Moms on Investigation Discovery ... Mother  
Drowns Children For Money. 1.47, Saved by Drowning. 1.35.

#### Monster mom detailed her helpless son's suffocation to cops | New ...

[nypost.com/.../monster-mom-detailed-her-helpless-sons-suffocation-to...](#)  
New York Post -  
Jul 10, 2014 - The Queens mom who sickeningly posted photos of her dead 11-month-old son on  
Facebook after smothering the child in a sheet told ...

#### Monster Mothers - YouTube



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HA7PzE7Cd8c>  
May 9, 2016 - Uploaded by DawnforgedCast  
Its Monday and that means it is time for Monsters. It is also Mother's Day and  
that means it is time for Mothers ...

#### Monster mom - Mother and her two children slapped with long prison ...

[jamaica-gleaner.com/.../monster-mom-mother-and-her-two-childre...](#)  
Gleaner Company -  
May 8, 2016 - Today is a special day in Jamaica when mothers are honoured, pampered, and  
showered with love and gifts, but 46-year-old Lorraine Peralta ...

### Thoughts? Additional Notes? Source(s)?

- Google search. Key words, "monster mothers"

## Field Note.0063

Date: Thursday, April 23, 2015

Time: 9:51 a.m.

Location: My home office

Activity: Researching Smith and Yates infanticides

### Jottings

[Letter from Susan Smith: 'I am not a monster' | www.ajc.com](#)

[www.ajc.com/news/national/letter-susan-smith-not-monster/nm5Wz](#)

Jul 23, 2015 · Susan Smith, now 43, penned a letter from prison to reporters writing a retrospective about the murder of her two sons, Michael and Alex.

Images of [susan smith letter](#)

[bing.com/images](#)



See more images of [susan smith letter](#)

37,839 RESULTS - See less

**Andrea Yates** - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrea\\_Yates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrea_Yates)  
Andrea Yates, born Andrea Phe Kennedy July 2, 1964 (age 52) Hallsville, Texas, who confessed to drowning her five children in their bathtub on June 20, 2001.

**Texas mother drowns children: Andrea Yates and "family"** ...  
[www.fox.com/articles/2001/07/yates\\_02.html](http://www.fox.com/articles/2001/07/yates_02.html)  
Texas mother drowns children: Andrea Yates and "family" ... now after the wife to the family's husband ... 1998-2016 World Socialist Web Site - All rights reserved.

**Videos of andrea yates drowns children in bathtub**  
bing.com/videos

**0001: Andrea Yates Drowns** A mother's ...  
ABC News  
Yates, Andrea  
huffpost.com  
Jul 01

**10 Years After Andrea Yates** ...  
ABC News  
Yates, Andrea  
huffpost.com  
Jul 01

**0002: Andrea Yates' Ex** ...  
ABC News  
Yates, Andrea  
huffpost.com  
Jul 01

**Andrea Yates**  
Wikipedia  
Born: Jul 02, 1964 (age 52) Hallsville, TX  
Spouse: [Percival Yates](#) (m. 1993–2000)  
Children: [John Yates](#) (son) · [Paul Yates](#) (son) · [Laine Yates](#) (son) · [Mary Yates](#) (daughter) · [Noah Yates](#) (son)  
Parents: [Julia Karin Kuebler](#) (mother) · [Andrew Ernest Kennedy](#) (father)  
Siblings: [Brian Kennedy](#) (brother)  
Education: University of Houston · Milby High School

### Thoughts? Additional Notes? Source(s)?

- Google search: “monster mothers; Susan Smith letter; Andrea Yates”
- We’ve all heard the saying, “she’s a natural born mother.” I remember a girl from middle school who called herself the mother of her friends. Was she a natural born mother?
- Susan Smith was a mother from South Carolina who killed her two sons. She didn’t plan to commit murder, according to Smith’s letter. Regardless of her plans, two boys are dead.
- Andrea Yates was a mother. She was a mother who killed her five children. She held each one down in the bathtub until their lungs filled with water. Was she a natural?

## Field Note.0064

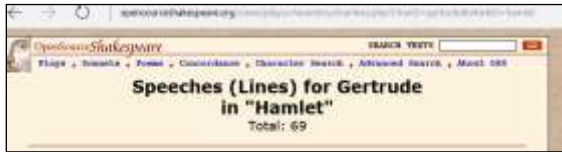
Date: Friday, April 24, 2015

Time: 9:27 a.m.

Location: My home office

Activity: Reading about mothers in literature

### Jottings



### Thoughts? Additional Notes? Source(s)?

- Monstrous mothers in literature
- Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother who lacked a moral compass, to say the least, didn't plan on Ophelia drowning. She didn't plan on breaking Laertes' heart—a heartbreak that turned to rage and ended in Hamlet's demise. Or maybe she did.
- We'll never know what the stepmother from the Grimm's' fairy tale, "The Juniper Tree," thought about when she cooked her stepson in a stew and later served it to her husband.
- Medea, the tragic and spiteful mother, who murders her sons before killing herself. In the act of suicide, did she atone for what she had done? Was Medea born to kill? Was she wronged by the circumstances of her life? Was she a mother who fulfilled her destiny?

- All mothers struggle at some point or another with feelings of inadequacy.
- My collage essay magnifies these fears and anxieties in an effort to make readers question the mythology of the “good” mother archetype.



# MISSING

## LOST VOICE

**When:** Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015

**How:** Phone stuck in auto-reboot loop.  
Restored factory settings.  
Reset phone & realized what I'd lost.

**What:** My voice field notes.  
Maddie's first laugh. Her babbles.  
Gone. Lost forever.  
Everyday moments.  
Part of Maddie.  
Never to return.

\$ REWARD AVAILABLE \$

## MISSING: LOST VOICE

### REFLECTIONS

#### *An Easter Morning Prayer*

Dear God,

We're going to strike a deal. Make a bargain. Give me my memories back and I'm yours forever. Earlier today, God, on this Easter Sunday, my cell phone kept restarting itself. The eternal loop. I rebooted my phone but there was a cost. I had to delete everything. Everything. I lost the recording of my daughter's first laugh. It happened on Valentine's Day. Don't you recall, God? Didn't you smile down when you heard her laugh even harder when I replayed the recording for her? I lost her coos and goos at Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet while she read the baby version of *Pride and Prejudice*. You of all beings know that I listen to these recordings late at night when I can't sleep. And I listen in the afternoons when I struggle to stay awake. When I'm uncertain if I go on. Keep up. Please stop inflicting this Old Testament God nonsense on my life. I pray that you don't let me forget how my daughter's golden hair glowed in the morning sunlight as she crouched on the front lawn with Easter eggs surrounding her feet. How she teetered and tripped over bright green plastic eggs because of those flimsy denim sandals with cloth soles I made her wear. I suppose I should praise you, God, for providing me with the good sense to back up my pictures. But it's those voice files I didn't back up. Look, I can live without the six months' worth of voice field notes. I haven't even mentioned the field notes. Those observations I'll never recover. But, please, God return those giggles and my daughter's raspy breaths at 4 a.m. when she was three days old. Please do something. If you find my voice files, God, you'll know where to find me. Amen.

**BLIND**

## DARK CLOUD: FIELD NOTES,<sup>1</sup> FOUND NOTES<sup>2</sup>

The dark cloud returns. 10.05 am.<sup>3</sup> Is there no way out of the mind?<sup>4</sup>

\*\*\*\*

The baby is taking a long nap this afternoon. She naps against my chest. Her mouth is opened wide enough that I can see her tongue and front two teeth. Crusty bits of lunch (pureed banana mango, chicken and rice) pepper her cheek; a tiny spec rests on the left corner of her left eyelash, remnants along her upper lip. Her hand rests on my heart. I'm in my office sitting on my brown leather couch, a polka dot pillow resting behind my head, the gas fireplace whirling. I watch the flame flicker. The past few weeks I've struggled with my dark thoughts. It's a different sort of dark thought than the kind that plagued me when baby was brand new. More of a listlessness. A constant questioning of purpose. Examples: "I have no value to society. I complete nothing. I'm vanishing like the steam that rises from my morning coffee—disappearing into thin air." I don't know how to stop these thoughts. They are constant and relentless.<sup>5</sup>

I am a victim of introspection.<sup>6</sup>

\*\*\*\*

Read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information is control.<sup>7</sup>

With postpartum depression, feelings of sadness and anxiety can be extreme and might interfere with a woman's ability to care for herself or her family.<sup>8</sup> Postpartum depression is a mood disorder that can affect women after childbirth. Mothers with postpartum depression experience feelings of extreme sadness, anxiety, and exhaustion that may make it difficult for them to complete daily care activities for themselves or for others.<sup>9</sup>

Research has shown that up to 33 percent of women experience clinical depression or an anxiety disorder at some point during pregnancy.<sup>10</sup> Even though we don't hear as much about anxiety disorders in pregnancy, they're actually more common than depression.<sup>11</sup>

\*\*\*\*

May 31, 2013 @notkathy to @MeringueMemory Is everything ok in Stillwater?<sup>12</sup>

I'm five months pregnant and finally starting to show. My husband leaves for a business meeting in Oklahoma City. I watch Gary England on News 9. A tornado is coming. A mile-wide tornado destroyed Moore last week. I ask my husband to cancel. He gets in his truck and drives away.

The storm sirens ring and I hide in the downstairs coat closet with my dogs. My body shakes. I cry.

The tornado passes over my town. My husband narrowly escapes it in Oklahoma City. I call his cell phone and scream when I hear him but he doesn't hear me.

"The tornado in Oklahoma City is two miles wide," says the newsman on the television in our living room.

The sirens stop blaring. I stay in the closet, crouched on the floor in the shape of a ball.<sup>13</sup>

It was a tornado of epic proportions. It was a tornado that took the lives of eight people, four of whom were chasing the storm that day. The atmosphere was primed for severe weather and in the early evening, a record, 2.6-mile wide tornado formed.<sup>14</sup>

\*\*\*\*

I've been in a horrible mood for the last week (or longer). Lost at sea. Aimless, worthless—like an empty bottle floating in the ocean.<sup>15</sup> Intense heat, bitter cold, terrible storms, shipwrecks, fevers, all such agreeable topics had been drummed into me until I felt much as I imagine one would feel if shut in a cave of midnight darkness and told that all sorts of horrors were waiting to gobble one up.<sup>16</sup> I am drowning, there is no sign of land.<sup>17</sup>

How do I write myself out of this darkness?<sup>18</sup>

\*\*\*\*

A long while she lay, not moving, with open eyes, whose brilliance she almost fancied she could herself see in the darkness.<sup>19</sup>

\*\*\*\*

I hope it stays dark forever.<sup>20</sup>

\*\*\*\*

Typically, when we think of [postpartum depression \(PPD\)](#), we think of sadness, despair, weepiness, and hopelessness. But depression can also be characterized by irritability, frustration, anger, and even rage.<sup>21</sup>

\*\*\*\*

I became unhinged this morning shortly before 7am when I spotted a dust bunny on the hardwood floor I'd scrubbed on my hands and knees yesterday. The offending bunny must have dropped off the heel of husband's boot last night after he cleaned the rent house. I'd recognize that dust anywhere.<sup>22</sup> So, so tired. Blank. Anger in my stomach, like the 4 humors.<sup>23</sup> Long is the way and hard, that out of Hell leads up to light.<sup>24</sup>

\*\*\*\*

I'm anxious and teary eyed. Sad. Lonely. I'm drowning. Drowning. And no one cares.<sup>25</sup>

\*\*\*\*

Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires.<sup>26</sup>  
Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.<sup>27</sup> I  
do not speak as I think, I do not think as I should, and so it all goes on in helpless  
darkness.<sup>28</sup> Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering,  
fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.<sup>29</sup> I'm  
your phantom dance partner. I'm your shadow. I'm not anything more.<sup>30</sup>

\*\*\*\*

It cannot be seen, cannot be felt,  
Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt,  
It lies behind stars and under hills,  
And empty holes it fills,  
It comes first and follows after,  
Ends life, kills laughter.<sup>31</sup>

\*\*\*\*

Even a happy life cannot be without a measure of darkness, and the word  
happy would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness. It is far better  
take things as they come along with patience and equanimity.<sup>32</sup> In order for the  
light to shine so brightly, the darkness must be present.<sup>33</sup>

\*\*\*\*

Maddie took her first steps tonight at around 7 p. She was in the living  
room and walked 3 steps toward her father.<sup>34</sup>



We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.<sup>35</sup>

\*\*\*\*

I'm nothing. No one. Nowhere. A mirage.<sup>36</sup>

\*\*\*\*

And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need  
Of aid from them—She was the Universe.<sup>37</sup>

\*\*\*\*

I believe now that I wrote myself into life. Before I learnt how to do it I lived as if blind, forever raging against the dark.<sup>38</sup>

DARK CLOUD: FOUND NOTES, FIELD NOTES  
REFLECTIONS

<sup>1</sup> What is an ethnographic field note?

"Ethnographers are continuously recording as field notes, what they are observing and learned in the field setting. The open-ended, emergent, discovery-oriented iterative, and reflexive attributes of the ethnographic enterprise make the collection of daily field notes necessary simply as a means of recording what is being observed and experienced by the ethnographer."

<http://www.cusag.umd.edu/documents/workingpapers/epiontattrib.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "Found poems take existing texts and refashion them, reorder them, and present them as poems. The literary equivalent of a collage, found poetry is often made from newspaper articles, street signs, graffiti, speeches, letters, or even other poems."

<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/poetic-form-found-poem>

*Quarter After Eight (QAE)*

Interview with David Shields

<http://quarteraftereight.org/shields.html>

QAE: Following up on that idea, please talk about the way you write toward self-expression, toward discovery, by compiling other peoples' ideas.

DS: I'd think of this differently. They're definitely not other people's ideas, or at the very least I make and remake them as my own by restringing, reframing, and rewriting them. That said, how did this book emerge? It began, believe it or not, as a course pack. I gathered thousands of quotations over many years to make the case for the excitement of the essayistic gesture--this for a course in nonfiction in a writing program that has no nonfiction track. Over years, the packet winnowed down to a few hundred pages. Then I started working to push the passages--my own and others!--into rubrics, e.g., Memory, [James] Frey, Hip-Hop, etc. I wrote new passages, rewrote others, found new quotes, just kept pushing the material forward. I often think of myself as less of a writer and more of a film editor."

<sup>3</sup> Field note, Saturday, 10.25.14

<sup>4</sup> Found Note: Sylvia Plath

<sup>5</sup> Field note: Saturday, 2.21.15

<sup>6</sup> Found note: Sylvia Plath

<sup>7</sup> Found note: Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

- <sup>8</sup> Found note: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/postpartum-depression-facts/index.shtml>
- <sup>9</sup> Found note: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/postpartum-depression-facts/index.shtml>
- <sup>10</sup> Found note: <http://www.parents.com/pregnancy/my-life/emotions/depressed/>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2012/04/19/4-facts-about-anxiety-during-pregnancy-how-to-find-help/>
- <sup>12</sup> Twitter, Friday, 5.31.13
- <sup>13</sup> Field note: Friday, 5.31.13
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.koco.com/weather/reflecting-back-on-historic-may-31-2013-tornado/26263358>
- <sup>15</sup> Field note: Tuesday, 11.4.14
- <sup>16</sup> Found Note: Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House; or, Nellie Bly's Experience on Blackwell's Island. Feigning Insanity in Order to Reveal Asylum Horrors*
- <sup>17</sup> The Mountain Goats, Song "No Children" (lyrics not in order)  
<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/mountaingoats/nochildren.html>
- <sup>18</sup> Field note: Tuesday, 11.4.14
- <sup>19</sup> Found Note: Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*
- <sup>20</sup> Found note: The Mountain Goats, Song "No Children"  
<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/mountaingoats/nochildren.html>
- <sup>21</sup> Found note: [http://www.babycenter.com/404\\_is-anger-a-sign-of-postpartum-depression\\_11717.bc](http://www.babycenter.com/404_is-anger-a-sign-of-postpartum-depression_11717.bc)
- <sup>22</sup> Field note, Tuesday, June 2, 2015
- <sup>23</sup> Field note: Monday, June 8, 2015
- <sup>24</sup> Found note: John Milton, *Paradise Lost*
- <sup>25</sup> Field note: Wednesday, 11.5.14
- <sup>26</sup> Found note: Shakespeare, *Macbeth*
- <sup>27</sup> Found note: Mark Twain
- <sup>28</sup> Found note: Franz Kafka
- <sup>29</sup> Found note: Edgar Allen Poe, *The Raven*
- <sup>30</sup> Found note: Haruki Murakami, *Dance Dance Dance*
- <sup>31</sup> Found note: J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*
- <sup>32</sup> Found note: Carl Jung
- <sup>33</sup> Found note: Francis Bacon
- <sup>34</sup> Field note: Wednesday, 11.19.14
- <sup>35</sup> Found note: Plato
- <sup>36</sup> Field note: Tuesday, 10.28.14
- <sup>37</sup> Found note: Lord Byron, "Darkness"
- <sup>38</sup> Found note: Susan Johnson, *A Better Woman: A Memoir*

## GOODNIGHT, DO NOT SLEEP

I'm 16, spinning in a chair waiting for the neurologist's diagnosis. I cannot sleep. I run. I open doors. I end up in places no sleeping person should, like the shower, like the dog's bed, like the deep freezer. Once I spent the night with a friend. The neighbors called the police. "Her screams were blood-curdling."

But I never remember. The neurologist prescribes Klonopin. It dulls my brain, but I still find myself inside my closet some mornings.

\*\*\*\*

*Go to sleep—though of course you will not—*

I vow to stay awake. It's my first night home after giving birth and I want to close my eyes. But I do not. I cannot. The baby cries the second she leaves my arms. Swaddling her doesn't work. She screams harder. Somehow she manages to free one arm from the swaddle. She's defiant, this one. "I'll show you, mother," she says with her tiny fingers. She finally falls asleep in her bassinet at seven in the morning. I collapse on my bed and sleep dreamlessly for two hours.

\*\*\*\*

*And the night passes—and never passes—*

This becomes our routine. I soothe, I swaddle, I nurse, she cries as I place her in the bassinet. I cannot "Ferberize" her. I can do little else but stare at the TV as she sleeps in my arms. I sit straight up in bed. I use a neck pillow. My bed is a cramped airplane seat. I know what infomercials will appear at 2 a.m. (Wen hair).

I sit in my recliner, hold my daughter, and watch the darkness through my window. I know when my neighbor's teen daughter comes home on school nights (3 a.m.). I know when my other neighbor goes outside to smoke (4 a.m.). I know the night, the dawn, the sunrise.

\*\*\*\*

Remember when the US military tortured Guantanamo inmates with round-the-clock Metallica, Nine-Inch Nails, and Britney Spears? The military knew that sleep deprivation would break their prisoners. No sleep—it distorts the mind.

\*\*\*\*

I'm drifting into madness. I am Nellie Bly, the writer who feigned insanity to write a book, only to wonder, after a while, if she was nuts after all. Two hours of sleep a night is taking its toll.

*Do not sleep for he is there wrapped in the curtain.*

I see things.

*Do not sleep for he is there under the shelf.*

This morning, I see myself in the driveway, body splattered on the pavement. Car tire tracks on my face. By the afternoon, I see my torso in the garage next to the chainsaw.

*Do not sleep for he wants to sew up your skin, he wants to leap into your body like a hammer with a nail*

I start negotiating with my subconscious. “*Stop. No more.*” I’m too exhausted to think of anything better to say.

\*\*\*\*

“Did you get the mail?” my husband asks.

“No,” I say. How can a ghost get the mail? I’m a *desert pillow, sleeplessness stretching its fine, irritating sand in all directions.* Gusts of sand trail behind me, blinding those in my path.

I cannot summon the energy required to walk to my mailbox. It’s all too much. The sleepless nights, the crying, the baby shit on my arms, the constant nursing.

\*\*\*\*

“The first six months are the hardest,” my sister-in-law reassures me. “It gets better.”

*It is the sting of snow, the burning liquor of  
the moonlight, the rush of rain in the gutters packed  
with dead leaves: go to sleep, go to sleep.*

She’s right. The baby sleeps for longer stretches of time. She still refuses to sleep in her bassinet or crib. In my arms, in my bed it is.

The hallucinations disappear. The night terrors haven’t returned.

“When will she sleep in her own bed?” my husband asks—our nightly argument.

“I don’t know.”

And I don’t know. What I know is I’ll do anything to sleep. I am too weak to “sleep train.” I tried for a month when the baby was five months old. I failed. I failed and I held her and I closed my eyes. <sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> The poems I reference in this essay are italicized. I reference: William Carlos Williams’s, “A Goodnight”, Anne Sexton’s, “Hornet” and Sylvia Plath’s, “Insomniac.”

## GOODNIGHT, DO NOT SLEEP

### REFLECTIONS

I slept through the night on my belly by the time I was six weeks old. Then I turned thirteen and started screaming and running in my sleep while swatting tarantulas off my back. At least once a week, I'd wake up as my father bear-hugged me in the stairwell, stopping a potential fall.

The tarantula dream changed eventually. But that didn't stop the screaming. Once when I was a college freshman, I woke up in my dormitory's hallway. Four or five concerned faces hovered above me as I sat on the floor and wondered why I wasn't in my bed. I'd dreamed that someone had broken into my room. I ran down the hallway and tried to push the "up" button on the elevator. The elevator had no "up" button. I lived on the top floor. I developed strategies for stopping my night terrors. I'd sleep with night lights; I'd tell myself to not have nightmares; I'd meditate; I'd take prescribed medications. None of this worked.

\*\*\*\*

At six weeks old, my daughter sleeps in my arms. I learn how to keep my body in a twilight sleep. The blue glare of the television watches me all night. The light from my bedside lamp tricks my body into staying semi-awake. I become my own torturer.

\*\*\*\*

Sleep means nothing until it's everything.



## SEASONS

*Summer, 2013*

The orange sky dazzles with its impasto of clouds and color.

Forty weeks along and no contractions. Forty weeks and my ankles swell and ache.

\*\*\*\*

*Fall, 2013*

Three hours. I push. My body a parting sea, stretching until my baby lands on dry ground.

\*\*\*\*

My hospital bed spins. Soars. Levitates. I'm drugged. Ecstatic. Invincible. The world glitters. Shimmers like a spider's web at dawn. Sweat drips from my nose. I'm naked. Famished.

\*\*\*\*

I'm paralyzed. Trapped. Legs numb. My bed's hostage.

\*\*\*\*

My right toe tingles. I clutch my hospital bed's guardrail until my knuckles turn white. I'm walking. I'm walking in a hallway, fluorescent and stark. I'm bleeding. My scarlet blood sprawling across my hospital gown like a poppy field.

*Winter, 2013*

One month passes.

The sheets on my bed are unwrinkled. Uninhabited. I cannot get my daughter to sleep. I want her to sleep in her bassinet but she wails the instant she leaves my arms. Every cry lodges a new complaint in my throat I can't expel.

Two months pass.

I fall asleep at sunrise. Again. I trip. Stumble down the stairs.

Three months.

I wake up in the middle of eating breakfast, face caked in oatmeal.

Four months.

I'm in the kitchen heating soup on the stove. I rinse off a spoon in the sink. I look out the window. I see myself jump off my neighbor's roof. I dig my fingernails into my forearm until I break the skin. I sleep two hours on a good night. Last night wasn't a good night.

I'm in the living room. I sit on the couch and nurse my baby. I admire the Christmas tree I've decorated. I marvel that I had the energy to put the garland on the balcony that overlooks the living room. I switch on the lights for the tree and the garland. Suddenly, the white lights blur. And there I am again. My body swinging from the balcony, the Christmas garland tied around my neck.

I hear the front door open. It's my husband.

"How was your day," he asks.

“Fine,” I say. “I changed diapers. Nursed the baby. Watched the news.  
The usual.”

I close my eyes; I open my eyes. I still see it. The swinging. The lights.

\*\*\*\*

*Spring, 2014*

I wake up in the middle of the night and cannot find the baby. I remember closing my eyes for a few minutes while I nursed the baby in bed. I scream, long and loud and guttural. Then I look down. She’s on the floor beside my bed, snoring. Her fists tucked under her chin. I pick up the baby and hold her. And I cry.

\*\*\*\*

*Fall, 2014*

One year. Time offers clarity. The morning sky radiates. Electric.

## SEASONS

## REFLECTIONS

I remember the moonlight.

It streams into my living room and onto Madeleine's eyes and nose while she's sleeping in my arms. My daughter was born with her eyes wide-opened. Eyes bright like tonight's full moon, two circles of glowing, sapphire light. A piercing and focused gaze filling me with a delirious love.

\*\*\*\*

I escape from my self-doubt, my anxiety, my guilt when I bury my face into my daughter's hair and inhale her sweetness. Her hair is like strands of flaxen cashmere thread, soft and delicate.

\*\*\*\*

What a baby wants most, is simply you. Simply all of you—your mind, your emotions, your complete presence in the moments you spend together.

\*\*\*\*

"Butter in my hair, mommy," my two-year-old says. I'd turned around for a minute while unloading the dishwasher to discover that she'd smeared peanut

butter in her hair. She giggles and throws green peas at the dog. Madeleine knows when my mind wanders; she knows how to bring me back to her.

\*\*\*\*

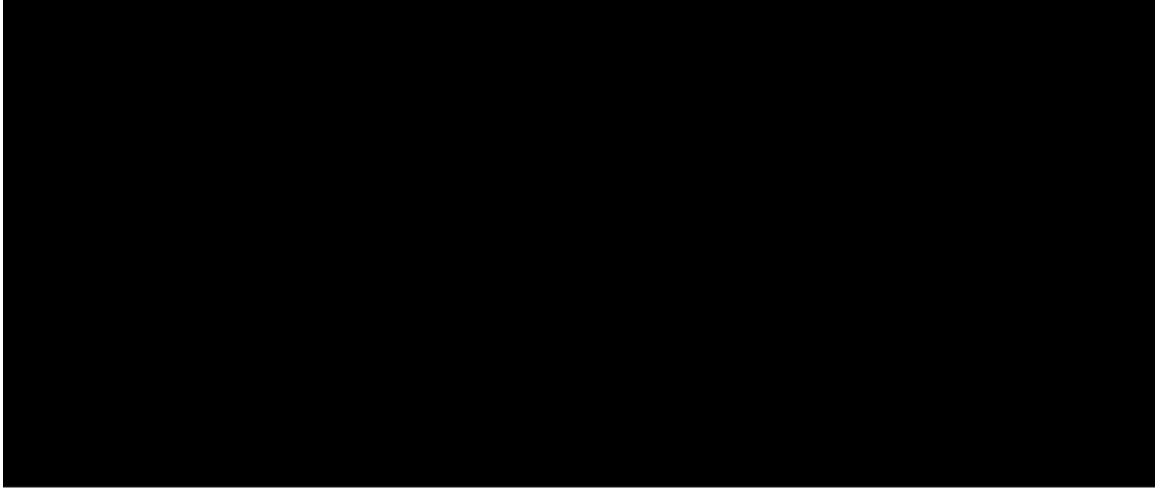
I will never finish being a mother. I will remain awake and restless for the rest of my life. My baby is always there, always looming in my thoughts.



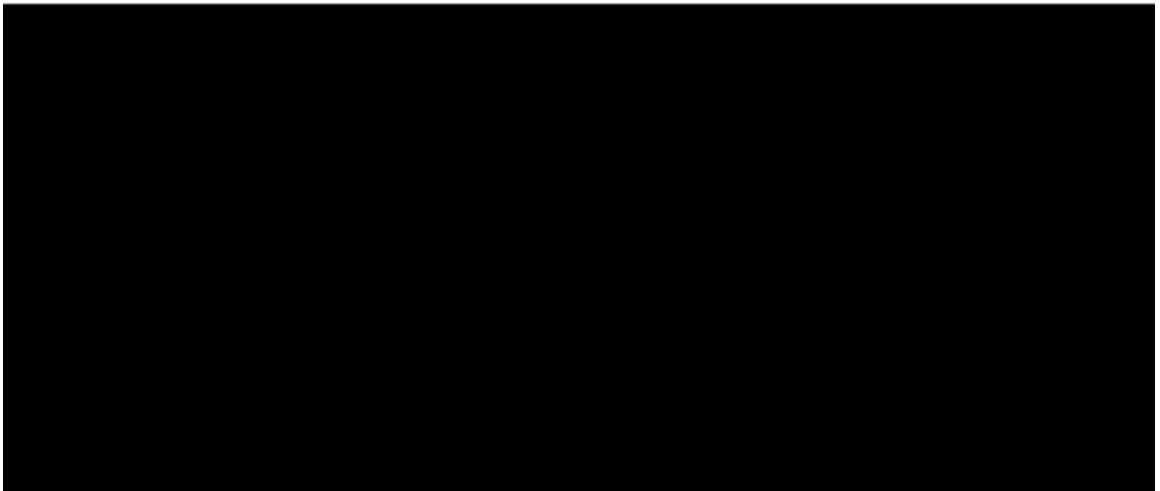
I lay Peeled potatoes in the iron pot,  
beside the meat, as it strains a tongue of  
fat  
to lick its own blood,  
just as I strain at keeping you with me.

Li

The Estranged



# **TASTE**





## PLACENTOPHAGIA



### Ingredients

- One placenta
- A cooler
- An accomplice
- A getaway car
- A hazardous waste bag
- Dehydrator
- Sharp knife
- 130 empty encapsulation capsules

## Directions

### *Preparation: Phase I*

Lay in your hospital bed and forget about the catheter inserted in your bladder. Forget for a moment that you are still overwhelmed by that final push. You pushed and pushed for over two hours, determined to avoid those medieval looking forceps shoved inside you, tearing your insides out and denting your baby's head. You shit on the delivery nurse. Whoops. Pushing and pooping evoke the same sensation. The epidural, the blessed elixir that erased those contractions and sent you flying into the last peaceful nap you'll have for years, makes your body numb. There's no squatting or birthing tub or mooing like a cow while on all fours. There's only focused pushing while on your back—legs spread eagle, knees next to your ears. It wasn't so bad. Wait a minute. That's a total lie. Crowning hurt like hell. Burning and pressure and burning and skin ripping and later stitches. And then there was your baby. You were two weeks late and she wasn't covered in the milky gunk you saw in birthing videos in the hospital baby class. You make the nurses and doctors keep your baby attached to the placenta and umbilical cord for two minutes to encourage better blood flow. They think you're foolish for wanting this. Who cares what doctors want?

### *The Send-Off in the Hospital Parking Lot*

You specified in your birth plan that you were taking your placenta home with you. The delivery nurses packed your placenta in a hazardous waste bag

and then smooshed it into a Styrofoam cooler your husband bought a few hours before at the corner gas station. They give your cooler to your doula. She carries a part of you outside to the hospital parking lot. Off you go.

### *Preparation: Phase II*

Are you afraid of blood? Banish your fear because your placenta is a bloody forest of tiny veins.\* Put the bloody mess in the kitchen sink and wash the blood away.\* Next, find your favorite pot and place the placenta in it for steaming. You'll notice a difference in size. It goes from looking like raw hamburger meat to something resembling a cooked burger. Grab a sharp knife and a cutting board. Slice your placenta into thin pieces, like a beef carpaccio. Place your placenta carpaccio into the dehydrator. It must crumble upon touch. Your placenta is dust—a fine powder in a glass bowl. Pour it into an empty capsule. Repeat 130 times. Put capsules in a glass jar. Refrigerate.

### *Swallowing*

Place the placenta capsule on your tongue. Swallow whole, the way you'd swallow an oyster. The aftertaste is earthy and musty— the taste of new life.

### Notes

\* Lock your dogs in the bedroom. Remember the time they devoured two pounds of ground beef from the kitchen counter?

\* Notice the tear where your bag of waters broke. Can you see it? This door into the world?

## PLACENTOPHAGIA

### REFLECTIONS

Consuming one's placenta, or *placentophagia* in Greek, is a commonplace practice among the world's cultures. My doula, Elena, collected my placenta, an organ covered in spindly veins mimicking the roots of an ancient tree, from my hospital nurses in a bright orange hazardous waste bag. Elena also assisted the woman I hired to encapsulate my placenta at my house in the kitchen. Encapsulation is one way of handling the placenta—women in Costa Rica bury it to protect from blood clots; women in ancient Egypt had the placenta accompany pharaohs; some women bury their placentas in their gardens; others burn it, or fry it with onions, or eat it raw.<sup>15</sup>

In A Dictionary of English Folklore, the placenta had many uses: rose bush fertilizer, lactation enhancer, sore nipple reliever. Placenta-as-potential-lover-attractant is my favorite usage: "In 19th century Cheshire, some men believed they could gain the affections of a woman almost against her will by burying a placenta at the threshold of her house." The woman of interest, it was noted, was "very self-willed."<sup>16</sup> The relationship, I'd like to note, didn't work out.

I have pictures of my placenta—bloody and quivering like a few pounds of hamburger meat ready to be eaten. Many Americans consider eating the

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<sup>15</sup> Buckley, Sarah J. "Placenta rituals and folklore from around the world." *Midwifery today with international midwife* 80 (2006): 58.

<sup>16</sup> Simpson, Jacqueline, and Stephen Roud. *A dictionary of English folklore*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2000.

placenta a form of cannibalism—even though all other mammals eat theirs<sup>17</sup>. Maybe I saw placentophagia as a form of protection—better lactation, a lessened chance of postpartum depression. Numerous doctors say there is no benefit to consuming the placenta.<sup>18</sup> But my brain purred after I swallowed my placenta pills. My placenta was my protector, my magical ruby pendant charged with combatting the dark.

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<sup>17</sup> Cremers, Gwendolyn E., and Kathryn Graff Low. "Attitudes toward placentophagy: a brief report." *Health care for women international* 35.2 (2014): 113-119.

<sup>18</sup> Beacock, Michelle. "Does eating placenta offer postpartum health benefits?." *British Journal of Midwifery* 20.7 (2012).

## THE NURSING DIARIES

*Wednesday, November 18, 2015*

I envy those writers who document the early, hazy days of nursing their new infant. Ann Lamott—here’s looking at you—with your witty observations in *Operating Instructions*. How in the hell did you have the wherewithal to keep a diary? Then there’s Mary Karr. How did you remember those early days of motherhood and nursing? I mean...really. When I read this sentence in *Lit*—“As a new mother, I used to cup my son’s downy head with wild tenderness and marvel at his heavy slump in my arms, and for the few moments his china-blue eyes fixed on mine before they closed, it was as if the sky had been boiled down and rendered into that small gaze. Those first months, I fed him from myself. And doing so felt like the first true and good act I’d managed in my whole slipshod life.”—I am moved. When I read the next sentence, “Then I started drinking every day and stopped breastfeeding, and tonight, while holding the bottle to his working mouth, I averted my eyes for fear he’d see the gunshot animal I’m morphing into....” —at first I think, “I’m not jealous of you anymore, Mary Karr.” Then, I reconsider my judgment. That could be me. That could be who I’d turn into if I stopped breastfeeding.

My recollections of nursing my baby are a jumbled mess. All I managed to write in the first year was the time and duration my daughter nursed on the right breast then the left breast. And I only kept that up for four days.

Lactating breasts require constant care and attention. Nurse too infrequently and the breasts rebel in the form of plugged milk ducts. Nurse too frequently—if that’s even possible—and the nipples crack and bleed. Nurse in public without a nursing blanket and prepare to be the object of strangers’ disgust.

The one time I managed to write an entry in my diary about nursing happened when my daughter had turned one. My husband and I had a trip planned to Napa Valley. I’d barely been out of the house and the thought of having a whole week of boozy freedom was overwhelming. Of all the moments to write about—to find a singular moment to sum up nursing and the strange, emotional head space it puts the mother in—this was it.

*Sunday, September 28, 2014*

I wake at 4.12 to nurse Madeleine. Matt and I have a flight to catch. A miserably early flight. We celebrated her first birthday yesterday. During my champagne toast I said, “We survived.” That says it all, doesn’t it? What more can new parents want? She didn’t fall asleep until after ten. Sugar overload, perhaps.

Madeleine doesn’t sleep in her crib. She co-sleeps with me. Today, at this early hour, my mother, who is in town to care for the baby, slips into my bed and cradles the baby in her arms. I grab my travel breast pump from the nightstand in the dark. I slip a Xanax under my tongue before I leave the bedroom.



I don't remember the hour and a half car ride to the Oklahoma City airport. We connect to Dallas and I start to wake up on the flight en route to San Francisco. About an hour into the flight, I reach into my purse for my pump. It's a discreet pump—one with a valve, a compressor, an attachment for the bottle, and a breast shield. I drape a hot pink scarf over my chest. I see the compressor, the breast shield, the bottle attachment.

Where's the valve? As I start to panic—all the while holding my right breast that's started to become engorged with milk—the flight attendant's voice overtakes the cabin.

"Is there an EMT or paramedic on board?" she asks.

A group of people—presumably medics—surround a man two seats in front of me. One of the medics waves a blood pressure cuff in the air. Meanwhile, I tend to my personal medical drama. I squeeze my nipples and hand-express close to two ounces of milk. Hand expressing breast milk is painful and excruciatingly slow. The plane starts to rock. I spill breast milk on the left side of my black shirt. I panic. I tear up. I don't want the nursing relationship I have with my daughter to end this way. I'm consumed with guilt and dread. All over a small piece of plastic. I write in my diary. I don't know what else to do.

## THE NURSING DIARIES

### REFLECTIONS

The year was 2000 BC. The place was ancient Egypt. A young mother died in childbirth; another mother was unable to lactate. Their children's best chance at survival was suckling the breast of a wet nurse.<sup>19</sup> Fast forward to ancient Greece, 950 BC. Wealthy mothers often chose to have a wet nurse feed their babies rather than nursing their babies themselves. A debate was brewing. A debate we know very well today: what's the best way to feed an infant?

In the United States, breastfeeding was the preferred method of feeding an infant until the wide commercial release of non-milk formula in 1951. It was well known to mothers throughout the 18th and 19th centuries that animal-based milk for infants were often a deadly choice because most families were unable to keep the milk from spoiling. As a result, infants who ingested the bad milk regularly died. In addition to spoiled milk, sterile bottles and nipples were unavailable until 1912, thus increasing the chance of death significantly for the baby. Women were rightly skeptical of not only formula, but of doctors themselves. In 1811, an anonymous mother published *The Maternal Physician*, which was one of the first mother advice books of its kind.<sup>20</sup> The writer expresses her disapproval of a popular doctor, Dr. Hugh Smith, who championed forcing

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<sup>19</sup> Stevens, Emily E., Thelma E. Patrick, and Rita Pickler. "A history of infant feeding." *The Journal of perinatal education* 18.2 (2009): 32-39. Online <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2684040/>

<sup>20</sup> O'Reilly, Andrea, ed. *Encyclopedia of motherhood*. Sage Publications, 2010. p. 27

infants to eat three square meals a day like adults because nursing is such a tiring endeavor. She states:

“I have often been vexed with physicians who, while they exhort us to follow nature, from a misplaced indulgence to the prevailing fastidiousness of the age, adopt the absurd notion that a mother cannot endure the fatigue of suckling her own child...Such unhappy mothers are to be pitied, but I greatly fear the far greater number who neglect this sweet endearing office are more fit objects of censure than pity.”<sup>21</sup>

In the nineteenth century, mother knew best. The mother’s confidence in her abilities to make decisions for her baby, however, would diminish as advances in science were made throughout the remainder of that century and into the twentieth century. Once bottles could be sterilized safely and a non-milk powdered formula was available to the public in the 1950s, doctors and formula companies aggressively campaigned to convince women that the breast was not necessarily the best option for infant feeding. Medical pamphlets and medical books were disseminated and women were told that formula was scientifically superior to breast milk.<sup>22</sup>

It wasn’t until the 1970s that many women began questioning the advice of medical doctors and some women began advocating the breast over the bottle. Breastfeeding proponents emphasized the benefits of breastfeeding to the

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<sup>21</sup> O’Reilly, Andrea, ed. *Encyclopedia of motherhood*. Sage Publications, 2010. p. 35

<sup>22</sup> Coleman, Marilyn J., and Lawrence H. Ganong, eds. *The Social History of the American Family: An Encyclopedia*. Sage Publications, 2014. p. 150

general public starting in the late 1980s.<sup>23</sup> As the public became more aware of the benefits, more women chose to breastfeed their babies rather than to bottle feed them.

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The demographic that was the most likely to breastfeed infants in the twenty-first century—the century in which I became a mother—were educated white women.<sup>24</sup> Women of this demographic are able to access easily information extolling the medical benefits of breastfeeding. They are also more likely to have access to the time it takes to nurse an infant. I made the decision to breastfeed my child quickly. I skimmed the information my OBGYN provided me about breastfeeding. I didn't require much convincing about the health benefits. My friends who had recently given birth breastfed their babies and I was able to ask them questions.

I knew that I was going to stay home with my child, so I figured I'd find out how breastfeeding really worked once the baby arrived. Also, the thought of having to scrub and warm up bottles all night made me cringe. I decided to give myself six months to nurse the baby and if it didn't work out, it didn't work out. I wasn't part of a mommy group—which was both good and bad. Good because I didn't have to worry about being peer pressured about my parenting choices. Bad because I had no support network. Not that I had time for a support network. Breastfeeding an infant requires hours and hours of time; it requires being awake

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<sup>23</sup> Wright, Anne L., and Richard J. Schanler. "The resurgence of breastfeeding at the end of the second millennium." *The Journal of nutrition* 131.2 (2001): 421S-425S.

<sup>24</sup> Heck, Katherine E., et al. "Socioeconomic status and breastfeeding initiation among California mothers." *Public health reports* (2006): 51-59.

around the clock; it requires occasional trips to the doctor for infected milk ducts. To say breastfeeding is exhausting is like saying running a marathon is a bit tiring.

In the middle of the night when I hold my daughter in my arms and nurse her in the darkness, I read this sentence from Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary*: "Nursing an infant creates so much lost, empty time. Of the baby's nighttime feeds I remember nothing. Of his daytime feeds I remember almost nothing." And I find comfort. Reassurance.

## SOME NOTES ON BREAKFAST

*Monday, June 2, 2014*

My temples pound from lack of sleep. A storm passed through last night. And by "passed through" I mean winds that shake branches causing a THAWACK, THAWACK sound against the window. Storms that "pass through" Oklahoma bring tornadoes. I worry about tornadoes that haven't formed. I worry about protecting my baby during a tornado.

Morning arrives and I have a headache and a skillet soufflé to cook. The sky remains gray and cloudy. As I start whisking the milk and eggs for the soufflé, my mood improves. The sun starts shining while the coffee in my French press brews. My baby babbles at me from her high chair. There's something humanizing—if that's the right word—about sitting down to a well-dressed table and enjoying a meal.

Dirty dishes fill my kitchen sink. I'll clean it up later. Right now I want to savor the sunlight while it lasts.

*Thursday, June 5, 2014*

Slowing down to enjoy breakfast has made me remember so many things I've forgotten I ever enjoyed. Like French press coffee, like sitting down to a well-set table, like using my nice dishes even though I dine alone, like reading poetry and not worrying if I'm reading it correctly.

It storms outside. I spill the steel cut oats canister in the pantry. Tiny bits of oatmeal cling to the plastic shelf liner. But once I start whisking the milk, egg, and syrup for the baked oatmeal I'm making for breakfast today, I feel less irritated. Pouring oats, sprinkling cinnamon, and stirring relaxes me.

I search for Galway Kinnell's poem "Oatmeal" on YouTube on play it for my daughter. She gnaws on her Sophie the Giraffe teething toy and pays little attention to his voice, but I let him speak anyway. I find comfort—or maybe it is more of a perverse delight—in the imaginary characters that show up for his breakfast. In the monotony of my days, Kinnell and his company—Keats and Spenser and Milton—help to keep me from turning into a beige puddle of goop. Kinnell reminds me to be light; to remember that I have a sense of humor and can laugh. So I do.

*Friday, June 13, 2014*

Madeleine cries while I arrange baked apples on my plate. Even though the overcooked apples look like wilted collard greens, the shapely scent of hot butter, sugar, and cinnamon slinks from the oven and settles in the kitchen air.

I inhale the aroma and notice another one. An aroma less pleasant. An aroma both putrid and acidic. I wipe butter from my hands. My jeans are wet. Baby pee. It's only 9.26. Long day ahead.

*Wednesday, June 18, 2014*

Maddie and I eat fresh blackberries from a friend's farm. She picked them off the vine yesterday. I scoop vanilla yogurt from its container and plop it in a Martini glass. Madeleine gnaws on Sophie the Giraffe in her highchair. No crying this morning.

*Wednesday, June 25, 2014*

We leave for a business meeting in Texas tomorrow. I am a wreck. I am not packed. The baby is not packed. I discover that we are out of trash bags. I burn my fingers on the cinnamon bread I reheat. I spill another cup of coffee. The baby almost buys an app on my phone. Is this a sign of things to come?

*Thursday, June 26, 2014*

I cooked coconut grits and baked gluten free banana bread yesterday. I heat up my grits and eat the banana bread.

We plan to leave our house for Matt's annual business meeting in Texas at 9 this morning. Two or three dirty diapers and a couple of crying fits later, we depart Stillwater at 10.45.

*Friday, June 27, 2014*

Sun shines inside our hotel room, but the room remains murky like an unkempt fish tank. I skip the breakfast buffet because the baby slept through it. I



make a cup of coffee the color of dirty dishwater.

*Sunday, June 29, 2014*

We leave this morning. I have survived my first road trip with a 9-month old baby. Bottled water and banana bread crumbs are breakfast.

## SOME NOTES ON BREAKFAST

### REFLECTIONS

The other day on my way to pick up Madeleine from preschool, I listened to a show on National Public Radio about a man who has hyperthymesia. His brain is unable to forget anything. He relives his memories; his memories, unlike mine, are tacit and alive. The radio host asked listeners what experiences from their lives they'd like to remember in vivid detail. A man called in and said, "I'd like to remember everything about my son's birth and his early years."

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One early morning, at six o'clock, Madeleine insisted on eating peanut butter for breakfast from a green spoon. Not the orange spoon or the red spoon I handed her. "Green spoon, Mommy. Green spoon." She's two-and-a-half and I'm amazed at how different she is today compared to how she was when I took notes about the breakfasts we shared together two years ago.

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It's the early moments of a child's life that are easiest to forget. Those late nights, those endless diaper changes and feedings. Those details fuse together. Become forgettable moments. Tedious. Repetitive.

If I had hyperthymesia, I'd return to my breakfast notes from a couple of years ago. I wish I'd written down more. Every detail—Madeleine's gummy

smiles, the cadence of her infant voice. I'd relive those days, those fleeting, sweet moments.

**TASTE(LESS)**

## NOTHING AT ALL

Self-Observations of a SAHM, May 18, 2015-June 18, 2015

*Days observed: 30*

*Hours observed: 360*

*Baby's age: 18 months*

*Number of diaper changes: 180*

*Average number of activities completed before naptime: 31*

*Average number of time to self per every 24 hours: 2 hours*

*Total word count of unedited observation notes: 9826*

*Total word count of edited observation notes: 567*

*Emerging Themes: How do I stay so busy and feel like I've done nothing? Where do my mornings go? My afternoons? My evenings? What, exactly, do I do all day?*

### *Typical Mornings*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>
May 18	7 am	Neighbor boy dribbles basketball. Echoes.
	7.30 am	Baby wakes up; change her diaper, get her dressed, make beds, make coffee, make baby breakfast
	7.45 am	Drink coffee from French press, poured it into a white China cup with silver edge. Baby jumps on my lap and coffee spills down my chest. Change clothes.
May 19	8 am	Squash bug in living room; notice the heavy fog outside.
	4-6 am	Baby wakes and it takes two hours for her to go back to sleep.

May 24	2.30-4.45 am	Look who's awake again.
May 27	4-6.30 am	Baby opens eyes and insists on watching cartoons. The dog comes into bedroom at 5.30. Baby laughs.
May 31	4-6 am	Baby keeps saying, "night night." Finds her joke funny.
May 29	8 am	Baby sticks peanut butter in her ear. She finds it hilarious and starts doing this daily.
June 2	5-6 am	Baby up at 5 and wouldn't go back to sleep. She watches cartoons. Bubble Guppies.
June 5	3.45-4.30 am; 6.30 am	Baby wakes briefly; up again at 6.30. Cries. She watches Peppa Pig.
June 7	5.30 am	Up for the day.
June 8	4-5 am	Early wake up call. Again.
June 12	6 am	...and again...
June 13	6 am	...and again...
June 16	3-3.30 am	...and again...
June 18	2-2.30 am	...and again...
<b>Note: This is what happens before 8.</b>		

*Typical Grocery Store Shopping Experience*

Date	Time	Activity
May 27	11.30 am-12:15 pm	While in fruit aisle at Walmart, Baby grabs lemon and tries to eat it. Then knocks a piece of ginger root on floor. Tries to eat banana peel while in checkout line. Cashier, who has a six-year-old boy says, "The time goes

		by fast.” Baby waves at strangers on way to car. Only fusses a little in the car.
June 4	11.45 am-1 pm	<p>Drive to Walmart. Thankful Baby is over her aversion to car seats. Used to scream while running errands. In the fruit aisle. Baby yells NANAS as she passes the bananas. Rush to the cleaning supply aisle. Bottle of shower cleaner spills in cart. Baby continues yelling NANAS. Cleaner everywhere. Food in cart: one red bell pepper, one zucchini, plain Greek yogurt, one package smoked salmon.</p> <p>Two cop cars and a fire truck block the entrance to neighborhood. Gas leak. Baby hasn't given up on NANAS. Please, Lord, let this trip end.</p>
<b>Note: This is why I hold my breath while at the grocery store.</b>		

*Why Is Baby Still Awake?*

Date	Time	Activity
May 19	9-9.30 pm	Baby giggles and pretends to sneeze, “achoo.”
May 25	9-10 p	Baby laughs and plays and closes eyes near 10 p.
May 26	9-9.39 p	Loud storms; baby is scared. Has trouble falling asleep.

May 27	9-9.30 p	Baby plays peek-a-boo instead of going to bed.
May 30	3.30 pm	Neighbor kid bangs on front door. She has red wagon filled with Walmart bags. Baby finally fell asleep for late afternoon nap. Kid keeps banging on my door. Please don't wake up, Baby. Please don't wake up.
June 2	9.22 pm	Boy next door bouncing basketball. Wishing basketball would disappear. Baby asleep.
June 11	10 pm	Baby will not settle down. She used to fall asleep at 8 o'clock on the dot. What's happening?
<b>Note: How is it the end of the day already?</b>		



## NOTHING AT ALL

### REFLECTIONS

It's Friday night and my toddler, husband, and mother-in-law and I are eating dinner at a local pizza place. I order a glass of red wine that's too warm and wait until no one is watching to slide a spoonful of ice from my water into my wine glass. I coax my two-year-old daughter to take a bite of my cheese pizza. She slaps it from my hand. "No, mommy."

An elderly woman my husband knows stops by our table. She stands behind my chair, puts her hands on my shoulders and asks, "Are you working outside the home?"

I respond, "Not exactly. I'm finishing up my graduate degree and caring for Madeleine full time. So I write from home but I don't get paid for it."

"You do plenty of work. I understand how it goes. I did the same when my children were small," she says.

She squeezes my shoulders before walking to the cash register to pay for her meal.

When my daughter was an infant, I'd end the day wondering why I was exhausted after doing nothing at all, really. I knew there were diaper changes and feedings and naps. But what else? Staying at home with an infant isn't a job, right? That's what I told myself.

There were no alarm clocks buzzing in the morning, no commutes to work, no deadlines, no meetings, no 2 a.m. emails from students demanding extensions on assignments. It wasn't until I documented how I spent my days

and nights that I realized how much happened from hour to hour. That staying at home and raising a child required all of me. That my existence ceased. That “I” was a myth.

## THE ART OF SELF-REFLEXIVITY

### Interviews

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Stay at Home Writer Mom, *The Art of Self-Reflexivity*, No. 1

*Interviewed by Some Woman*

Stay at Home Writer Mom insists that I visit her in the daytime. She warns that I'll get lost at night because there are few streetlights and all I will see is black. I drive from the Oklahoma City airport along a straight stretch of highway on I-35 where there's nothing but flat land, cedar trees, and many, many cows.

I'm supposed to meet Writer Mom at Plaza Place. I see a three story tall inflatable orange gorilla in front of a used car lot. I must be close. I keep driving and turn left into the Plaza Place strip mall that's partly beige with army green awnings and brick the color of hay. I pull into the plaza and look at the shops: Oklahoma Wine & Spirits, Red Dirt Bakery, AT&T, Guns Gear & Training, Nails & Spa, Big Fish Sushi Bar, and the UPS Store. I can buy booze, get my nails done, buy an iPhone, mail a package, grab some sushi, and practice my shooting skills. I watch a guy who looks like an off duty cop pack one, two, three, no ten guns into a container on his motorcycle. Writer Mom isn't here yet, so I decide to pop into the Wine and Spirits store for a cold beer. There are no cold beers. Well, if I considered drinking a 3.25% beer like Bud Light I could have a cold one. But that's not me. I'm fucking civilized. My cell phone rings. It's Writer Mom.

"I'm not at Plaza Place," she says. "Let me give you directions to my house."

"Alright," I say.

"Turn left out of the plaza and get back on the highway. Drive past a mile-wide mud puddle we like to call The Lake. Turn right. You'll pass a small gas station on the right at the stoplights. Turn left. There's a one-room school house on the right. Keep going until you see a hundred lookalike houses. That's my neighborhood," she says.

I manage to find her house after four wrong turns. She wasn't kidding when she said all of these houses looked alike. I imagine this is the kind of neighborhood that's filled with women who bleach their hair blond and spray it stiff with Aqua Net.

I knock on the door. To my surprise, Writer Mom doesn't have bleach blond hair. Her hair is blond, though. But it appears she hasn't washed it in a week or more. I immediately decide I like her style.

She opens the door and says, “My husband and I swore we wouldn’t sell out and live in this neighborhood. But here we are.”

I thank her for the good directions.

“Knock on the wrong door at the wrong time and who knows what will happen,” she says.

“What do you mean?”

“You do realize where you are, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You’re lucky I answered the door and didn’t wave a gun in your face.”

She laughs. but I’m unsure if I should go along with the joke.

“Where’s the kiddo?” I ask, wondering why I used the word “kiddo.”

“She’s at my mother-in-law’s house. I wanted to actually get through this interview.”

Writer Mom ushers me into her living room. The carpet is white. What kind of nut has white carpet when there’s a toddler in the house? She tells me to take off my shoes. I sit on a sleek black leather couch, cross-legged, and glance at my bare feet. My bright orange pedicure pops against the black.

“Excuse me for a moment. Bathroom,” she says.

I notice that Writer Mom left her hot pink cell phone near me. I pick it up and scroll through her pictures. I find selfies of her posing next to an unmade bed, a kitchen sink with dishes piled high, and a bedroom with toys scattered everywhere.

“I see you’ve found my phone,” she says.

I wonder how long she’s been watching me? This must have been planned. She walks towards me and sits at the opposite end of the couch.

“Yeah, those pictures are for this “mom meme” idea I had. I don’t think I’m going to do anything with it. Are we ready to begin?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say as I hand her the phone.

INTERVIEWER

Your house is nice.

STAY AT HOME WRITER MOM

Where you expecting something different?

INTERVIEWER

Maybe.

SAHWM

Something a bit more Grapes of Wrath?

INTERVIEWER

Possibly. Let's start with the obvious question. How do you get any writing done?

SAHWM

Before my daughter started preschool, I'd wear her in my Moby wrap and write during naptime. She's a light sleeper. And didn't take a predictably long nap until she was almost two. Many afternoons I'd get 45 minutes in. An hour if I was really lucky.

INTERVIEWER

How do you get your mind settled? That's not much time. Many writers require at least two hours to make progress on anything.

SAHWM

And I'm a slow writer to boot. I don't know if I'd call my mind settled. It's more like — shit, I've got a limited amount of time. I better hurry. I used to procrastinate for hours. Those were the days.

INTERVIEWER

What are you working on?

SAHWM

My dissertation.

INTERVIEWER

How's it going?

SAHWM

It's slow going. And often frustrating, to be honest. I even once read in a book called *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* that people in situations like mine are experiencing nightmare conditions. I keep a quote from the book on my desk. It says, "Very few people are so self-punishing that they can continue to engage in a process that's painful and awkward, or in a regimen that makes them feel incompetent. If you're only managing to write late at night once or twice a week and one morning on the weekend; if you don't have any place (even if it's a broom closet) to call your own for your writing; if you've set up your schedule so that you always have to justify the time you spend writing to someone else— be that your partner, your child, or your boss; or if you have to steal moments while the baby or everyone else in the house sleeps, it might be possible to write a dissertation, but I wouldn't lay odds on it. Even if you succeed, it will be a miserable experience. I've known people in extreme circumstances who really had no good alternatives, but most people do have some choices. If your examination of your writing process reveals nightmare conditions like the ones described above, you need to ask yourself why you're setting yourself up to fail."

INTERVIEWER

Are you setting yourself up to fail?

SAHWM

Yes, in a way. A big project like a dissertation that requires substantial amounts of outside reading and research needs blocks of time. Minimal interruptions. But if you want to get something done badly enough, you'll find a way.

INTERVIEWER

Such as?

SAHWM

Learning to write on your smart phone. Using cloud services like Google Docs. Accepting that your ideal writing time (for me it used to be early in the morning) has changed. Nothing is the same after a baby enters your life.

INTERVIEWER

What happens after the dissertation?

SAHWM

Good question. I have no plans to be a tenure track professor.  
I want to write books. Get paid for it.

INTERVIEWER

A bit unrealistic, don't you think?

SAHWM

No more unrealistic than getting a tenure track professor job within 60 miles of where I live. My husband and I have cultivated a good life for ourselves here. I don't want to uproot my family for a job I might or might not be happy doing.

INTERVIEWER

You kind of remind me of an anti-Rebecca Schumann.

SAHWM

The quit lit gal? I guess you could look at my decisions like that. I've always been realistic about the job market for English majors with advanced degrees. I think it's important to be open-minded and creative about career possibilities. What I love to do is write. There's no reason to whine about my fate when I knew what it was or probably would be since I started grad school.

INTERVIEWER

So you're getting a vanity PhD?

SAHWM

I'm writing a book I believe in. Once that's finished I'll start the next book. Then I'll end up with three letters after my name.

INTERVIEWER

Did you always know you wanted children?

SAHWM

It was different when I was young. Children seemed like such an abstract idea. As the time got closer for me to think about having a family, I became scared.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

SAHWM

You obviously have never been pregnant.

INTERVIEWER

Fair point. Moving on. What's it like? When the baby is new and you're trying to write?

SAHWM

It's like trying to thread a sewing needle in an earthquake.

INTERVIEWER

Not easy, then.

SAHWM

Besides the attempts to sit down and write—and the difficulties with that while you've got a newborn attached to your breast—is the difficulty in freeing the mind enough to create.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned that your daughter is in preschool now. What's your writing life like now? Has it changed dramatically?

SAHWM

I have large chunks of time to think. Of course everything is different. That doesn't mean writing is any easier. But at least now I have a chance. Virginia Woolf said a woman needs a room of her own if she wants to write. It's true. You have to have a way to obtain peace and quiet if only for a little while. It's essential to the creative process. In addition to sitting down to write, you need time to sit down and breathe. Relax. Look out of the window and watch a hummingbird drink from a single rose.



## THE ART OF SELF-REFLEXIVITY

### REFLECTIONS

*Thursday, October 10, 2013*

I rock my two-week old infant to sleep. We're sitting together on the black couch in my living room and I'm listening to a news story on NPR about Alice Munro who won the Nobel Prize for Literature. I'd started reading her short story collection, *Runaway*, a week ago. I read at night while balancing *Runaway* on my knee, Madeleine sleeping beside me. I search the Internet for more information about Munro's life and work and I find an interview. This isn't an ordinary interview—it's *the* interview for a writer: The Paris Review. I learn that Munro has three children. Three children—I'm busy enough with one. How did she find the time to write a sentence? I look to the interview for the answer to my question.

MUNRO  
Their naps.

Their naps. Really? I, like the interviewer, have a follow-up question:

INTERVIEWER  
You wrote when they had naps?

"Yes," she says. I'll let Munro explain:

MUNRO  
Yes. From one to three in the afternoon. I wrote a lot of stuff that wasn't any good, but I was fairly productive. The year I wrote my second book, *Lives of Girls and Women*, I was enormously productive. I had four kids because one of the girls' friends was living with us, and I worked in the store two days a week. I used to work until maybe one o'clock in the morning and then get up at six.

And I remember thinking, You know, maybe I'll die, this is terrible, I'll have a heart attack. I was only about thirty-nine or so, but I was thinking this; then I thought, Well even if I do, I've got that many pages written now. They can see how it's going to come out. It was a kind of desperate, desperate race. I don't have that kind of energy now.

I read Munro's response over and over again. The writing life as a mother isn't easy, but it isn't impossible either.

\*\*\*\*

I know what you're thinking. Of course Alice Munro could write perfect short stories and novels in the middle of the night. She's *Alice Munro*. Who am I to glean encouragement from a writer and a mother like her? A Nobel Prize winner?

\*\*\*\*

I'm being ridiculous. Again. But I cannot help myself. Alice Munro and her genius and her gorgeous sentences and her experiences raising three children inspire me. What would it be like to mimic my own Paris Review interview? To leap inside the text and inhabit those sprawling, undulating paragraphs describing the interviewer's voyage to Munro's house? To ask those probing questions? I'll study her interview. I'll recreate a voyage to my house. I'll be the interviewer and the interviewee. I'll even borrow the interview's font and formatting. "There's a sort of honesty there," writes David Shields in *Fakes: An Anthology of Pseudo-Interviews, Faux-Lectures, Quasi-Letters, "Found" Texts, and Other Fraudulent Artifacts*, p. 12, "in the idea of "fraudulent artifact." A self-reflexivity. A confessional aspect that we find intriguing and real." I'll find the truth in this fake interview I've dreamed up. What do I have to lose?

## ALMOST (AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY)

I almost drowned when I was 10.

My body drifts to the bottom of my uncle's pool. Down, down I go, big toe hitting the cement. Bubbles swirl beneath my nose. I flutter kick until I reach the surface.

That was the plan.

I bump my head on a blue pool raft. Bump, bump. How much longer can I hold my breath? I thrash now, like the trout my father catches at Bull Shoals Lake. Side to side. Twist and turn.

Should I surrender? Let my body relax? Let the water fill my lungs? I'll sink like the bobby pins that hold the braid in place on the side of my temple.

One last time. I'll try one last time. To live. To break the water's surface. I see the sun and a cloudless sky as my head emerges from this pool, this liquid coffin, this childhood pleasure.

Drowning is a quiet act.

The incident makes me think of a little boy our family knew. He drowned at his pool party. I remember the day his father called our house to tell us about his son's death. I sat at the kitchen table and watched my father talk to his friend. He started weeping; I'd never seen him cry. The boy drowned silently in the deep end of the pool after choking on bright pink BubbleYum gum.

\*\*\*\*

I almost slit my wrists with two dull nails at church camp when I was 14.

The nails were taped to a notecard in the shape of a cross. As it happens, dull nails scrape the skin, barely leaving a mark.

\*\*\*\*

I almost considered going through with a pregnancy when I was 21.

I opened the classified section of the local paper and noticed an ad: Loving Christian couple seeks to adopt baby. Will pay for mother's medical expenses. I thought about calling the number in the ad; I decided against it. My body wasn't for sale.

\*\*\*\*

I almost dated a preacher when I was 22.

He was the pro-life preacher. I was the confused and conflicted young woman. Turns out preachers lust and manipulate others just like the rest of us. I rejected his advances. And he reacted like a man scorned.

\*\*\*\*

I almost avoided getting arrested when I was 23.

I spent the night out with a childhood friend at a dank dive bar called The Eagles. We danced. We laughed. We split a pitcher of beer. We drank wine. We stumbled into the parking lot looking for my car. She offered to drive. I said, "No, I will." A cop was waiting for me. Easy prey. Within minutes I stood on the side of

the road with one shaky foot in the air. I wore a tan and light blue scarf around my neck, tan sandals with heels, a pair of navy pants I found in Germany, and a white sleeveless shirt. I'd pulled my blonde hair back in a chignon. Chic. Especially with handcuffs. Then his hands pressed the top of my head and he pushed me into the backseat of his squad car. A movie moment. He pulled over when I told him I was going to throw up. Vomit might have stained my pants. I don't remember.

\*\*\*\*

I almost endured a natural birth when I was 33.

But the anesthesiologist made it to my hospital room right as I was beginning to have the urge to push. Five hours of labor with no pain relief were enough for me. I welcomed the seven-inch needle in my spine.

\*\*\*\*

I almost vanished forever when I was 34.

Right after my daughter was born, the days and nights blurred together. I had turned 33 three days before I gave birth to her. Then time kept moving forward whether I wanted it to or not. Before I knew it, I was 34. Some days I have the sensation of vanishing—the way steam from a hot cup of tea disappears into the morning air. I'm still here, though. I'm still here.

Almost.

## ALMOST (AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY)

### REFLECTIONS

Autobiographies are a relentless sea of truths and half-truths that are constantly formed and reformed on the page.

\*\*\*\*

When I was a child, I wanted to learn at least ten languages. I wanted to dance with the Bolshoi Ballet. I wanted to live in Mary Lennox's garden. I wanted to shed my skin and step inside Martha Graham or Gelsey Kirkland.

\*\*\*\*

I'm 21 and a pool of sweat forms in the middle of my back. I'm standing in the stifling hallway of my language school in Malaga, Spain talking to my teacher about staying in the country. He tells me to take a job at the airport as a translator. I consider his advice, but I am a coward. I board my flight the next morning. Within three months I accept a corporate job in St. Louis, Missouri.

\*\*\*\*

I shift from one foot to another while listening to my professor's girlfriend recount her adventures in France. I'd grown bored of the poetry reading that was happening in the background. The night was humid and flecks of condensation from the cold beer I hold drip onto the back of my hand. I wish I were her. She's an artist, a Bohemian beauty with long, flowing red hair. She's me in Spain all those years ago. She's what I could have become.

\*\*\*\*

I gather the facts of my life—my birth, my childhood, my education, my travels—and I squash them under my thumb like a tick. These facts are bland. Flavorless. They are unrepresentative of my desires, my hopes, my wishful thinking. It's the almos<sup>t</sup>s of my life that have the heat. That burn in my memory. Almost offers an alternate reality. A reality that is exhilarating in its never-ending stream of could-have-happens. Almost is fantasy. A journey into the unreal that's palpable. I *almost* drowned as a child. I didn't drown, but I can think about that experience and relive it. I can imagine what my funeral would have been like. I *almost* lived abroad in Europe. But I didn't. I could have avoided getting arrested had I let my friend drive. But that's not what happened. Almost is regret's distant cousin. A romanticized mourning of one's mistakes.

\*\*\*\*

Autobiographies are the stories of ourselves, of our lives we choose to share. But we cannot include every detail. Every fact. We shape and carve and sculpt our narratives. Autobiographies are metaphors for our ideal selves. Autobiographies of the "almosts" of our lives, however, are metaphors for our counterfactual selves. A grand fiction.



**TOUCH  
RECOIL**



*I am not what I am, I am what I do with  
my hands.*

*Louise Bourgeois*

*Sculptor*

# How to Write Your Birth Plan



Welcome to your birth plan!  
Are you ready for the perfect birth?

## Personal Information

NAME .....

**Tip:** It doesn't really matter much. Try "Patient X."

HOSPITAL .....

DOCTOR'S NAME .....

**Tip:** Your doctor might not show up. Try going into labor on a Wednesday or a Thursday. No doctor you like is going to show up for the weekend shift.

## Induction

There are many ways to induce labor. Below you'll find a few suggestions.

Carefully consider everything here. One false move in writing your birth plan and...you don't want to know.

- Take a long walk through your neighborhood. Walk up hills; walk down hills. Jog. Run! Anything to avoid having to drive an hour to the hospital to be pumped with drugs or to have a perfect stranger stick something resembling a knitting needle to rupture membranes.
- Put on a slinky negligee and your best "come hither" stare. Beckon hubby to the bedroom. Oh, who are we kidding? Next suggestion, please!
- Time for your medicinal herbs. Blue cohosh, anyone?
- Rub your breasts. Was it good for you? No? Then try...
- Castor oil.
- Beg and plead to God. Curse your husband. Curse everyone.
- How about Pitocin? Trick question, you sellout.

## Pain Relief

Real women do not require pain relief. Deep breaths and lavender oil should alleviate most of your pain. Be in the moment. Pain is primal and delightful.

But just in case you end up being weak, here are a few suggestions.

- Ask for an epidural.

**Tip:** Don't believe those women who say an epidural is like floating on a cotton candy cloud. They are weak, remember? When you're in so much pain that death seems like the better option, do not give in.

- Ask for tranquilizers.

**Tip:** Why not?

- Ask for that 1950s housewife twilight sleep stuff.

**Tip:** You'll ask for this once you're crawling on the floor with your ass hanging out of your hospital gown.

### **Hospital Staff Interference**

- Be warned that all sorts of nurses and residents and nurses-in-training will want to shove their hand inside you to measure your cervix with their fingers. You can say "no."
- Be warned that if you show up to your hospital after hours and your water has broken and you're doubled over in pain while leaking amniotic fluid on the floor, the hospital police officer will ask for your identification. Grunt something like, "are you serious?" while your husband searches for your purse in the car.
- Be warned that if you insist on wearing your own pajamas, the hospital staff will complain.

## C-Section

If your unborn baby has the inclination to stay in your womb forever, you might have to have a C-section. If this happens and you request that your doctor and staff “keep the small talk to a minimum” during surgery, expect a stern warning from said doctor that she “will talk if she wants to and cannot promise silence.”

## Second Stage of Labor

This is another test of your womanhood. During your contractions, you can:

- Gnash your teeth.
- Moo.
- Bray.
- Neigh. (kidding)
- Scream.
- Cry.
- Curse.
- Squat like nature intended.
- Roll around on an exercise ball.
- Hang out in the birthing tub.
- Stay on your back and remark on how easy this whole birth thing is because you had an epidural.

## **Delivery**

Does your partner faint at the sight of blood? If the answer is “yes,” here are some things to consider:

- Did your nurse tell you the story about the husband who fainted when he saw his wife’s blood, fell into a table, and ended up with a concussion and then died? No? Well, consider getting your beloved a helmet.

## **Keep Me in the Hospital For...**

As little time as possible. This really isn’t a choice. You and your extra-large mesh panties and new tiny human will be booted out ASAP.

## **Newborn Procedures**

Keep your baby close to you after birth. Connect with that bloody, sticky baby next to your breast.

## **Other Concerns**

How long is your birth plan? Because if it’s too long, your doctor will not read it. Cut your plan down to one page. Display your word count prominently so all

involved know they only have to pretend to read one page versus the original ten pages.

## HOW TO WRITE YOUR BIRTH PLAN

### REFLECTIONS

Giving birth in America has never been easy. In the eighteenth century, for example, the average American woman wrote her will whenever she found out she was pregnant.<sup>25</sup> Maternal and infant mortality rates were high. Until the early 1950s most women delivered their babies at home. Midwives attended to the births and for many years male medical doctors considered obstetrics beneath them.

It wasn't until the mid-1800s doctors even washed their hands while attending to mothers and babies<sup>26</sup>. Women contracted sepsis illnesses and often died.<sup>27</sup> In the 1950s when Twilight Sleep was introduced in hospital maternity wards, women recalled nothing with the morphine cocktail running through their veins. The strong pain reliever led to more maternal and infant deaths. The use of forceps were the norm and women were subjected to poor health standards.

In the 1970s American women began to push back against their treatment in hospitals. Expecting mothers wanted one thing: control. Control over their bodies; control over their babies; control over the experience of becoming a

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<sup>25</sup> Vinovskis, Maris A. "Mortality rates and trends in Massachusetts before 1860." *The Journal of Economic History* 32.01 (1972): 184-213.

<sup>26</sup> Wertz, Richard W., and Dorothy C. Wertz. *Lying-in: A history of childbirth in America*. Yale University Press, 1989.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4838a2.htm>



mother. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, mothers and fathers were increasingly involved in the prenatal and postnatal process.

Patients had expectations. Patients had demands. These expectations and demands materialized into the birth plan. Writing a birth plan is standard practice for new mothers. These plans convey a woman's expectations for what she wants to happen in the beginning stages of labor all the way to the delivery and those first moments with her newborn. While OBGYNs expect to read a birth plan from a patient, that doesn't mean they like them, will follow them, or take them seriously.

I found the process of writing a birth plan daunting and overwhelming. A simple Google search leads to millions of blog posts and books. Personally, I didn't want to write one but did when my doctor asked me a question pertaining to it during a checkup. I assumed the hospital staff would know what to do. I ended up copying and pasting a birth plan from the internet. I wasn't sure what I needed or didn't need. All I knew was that I didn't want a cervix check unless absolutely necessary. And I wanted an epidural. And I didn't want nurses and doctors touching my body often. And I wanted to wear my own pajamas. I soon realized, as clueless as I was, that I actually did have demands and expectations.

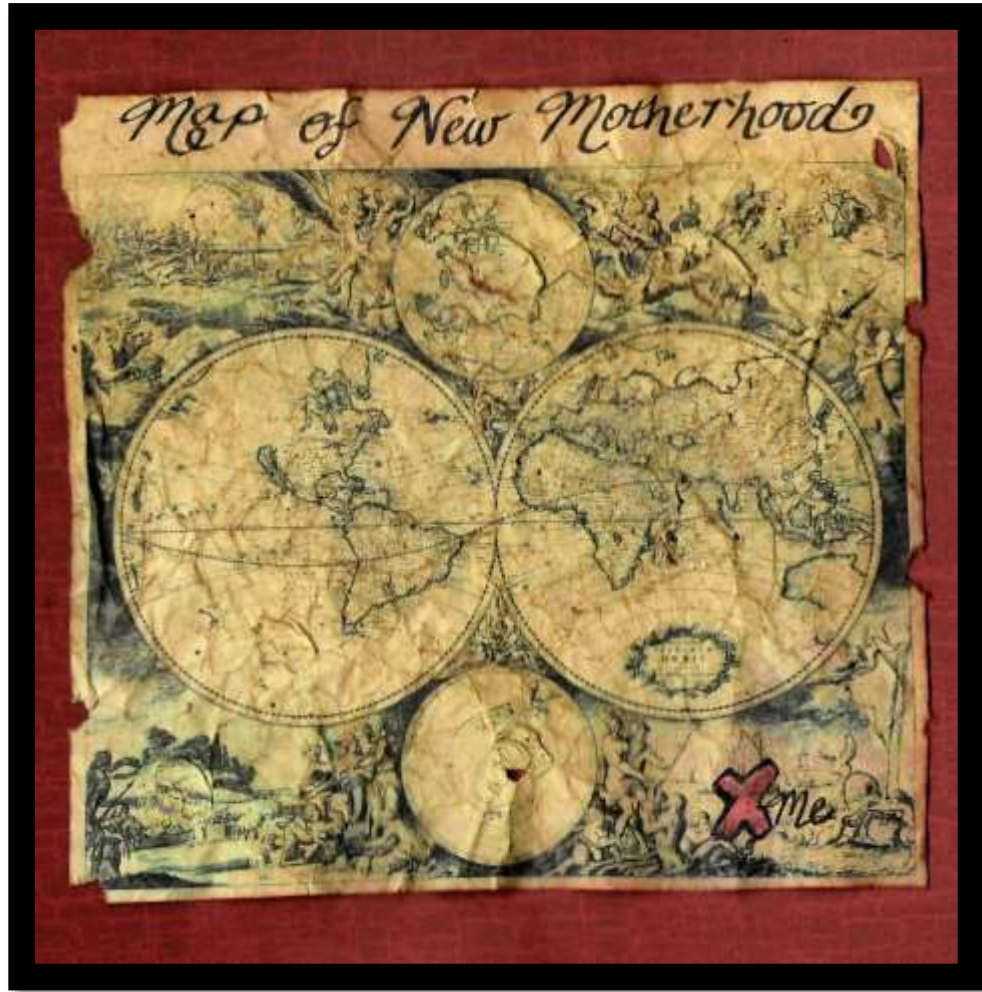
When I hurriedly put together my birth plan and printed it for my next doctor's appointment, the document was close to 10 pages, front and back. My doctor took one look at it and said, "No one is going to read a birth plan this long." I thought I'd included standard information, so her reaction surprised me. I

revised my birth plan down to one page, front and back. I also included the word count prominently at the top in bold print.

Later that week when I was at a fetal monitoring session because I was seven days overdue, my doctor called me with many concerns. I half listened to her because I had to click a button every time the baby moved. She went through my plan and told me why my requests were bad ideas. She especially disliked, “keep small talk down to a minimum” in the C-section portion of my plan. “I will talk to my colleagues during surgery. I can't agree to that.” I kept saying to most of her objections, “it's just some plan from the internet. I didn't know what to write.”

A birth plan, like a TSA security checkpoint, is a mirage. No woman or doctor can predict what will happen during a birth. Providing patients with a false sense of control is perhaps more of a good PR move than anything else.

LOST AND DROWNING (LESSONS IN CARTOGRAPHY)



*Creative Commons photo of antique map. Paper "aged" with Earl Grey tea and good old fashioned crumpling. Text written with calligraphy pen.*

## LOST AND DROWNING (LESSONS IN CARTOGRAPHY)

### REFLECTIONS

#### Lesson I: The Cartographic Paradox

I am the cartographer of my life.

I navigate windy roads and forgotten towns and empty oceans. Beware of the mountains, I remind myself often.

\*\*\*\*

*There's no escape from the cartographic paradox: to present a useful and truthful picture, an accurate map must tell white lies.<sup>28</sup>*

#### Lesson II: Lost and Drowning

I'm seventeen. I float on my back in the Caribbean Sea. Waves roll. Trade winds gust. Paradise.

\*\*\*\*

I'm windsurfing with my brother. We fight. He sails right; I sail left. I keep going. Not by choice. I paddle. I paddle towards Caracas instead of Oranjestad. I hear a shrill whistle. It's my father from shore. He sees me drifting. A ghost ship.

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<sup>28</sup> Monmonier, Mark. *How to lie with maps*. University of Chicago Press, 2014. p. 1

\*\*\*\*

Isabelle Eberhardt, nomad and Sufi mystic, drowned in the Algerian desert on October 21, 1904. She stood on the balcony of her clay house and watched the river that ran through Ain Sefra come towards her. She watched clay houses melt into the water. She heard the cries of entire families as the water overpowered them; all the while thinking the brevity of their cries possessed a certain beauty. She saved her husband from drowning, but a beam from her balcony pinned her down in the rushing water. Her friends discovered her swollen body days later.<sup>29</sup>

\*\*\*\*

I rest on my back beside Madeleine on the bluish-grey rug in our living room. The blue is calming, like the Caribbean Sea.

I'm lost.

I'm seventeen again and lost at sea. I'm Isabelle Eberhardt waiting for the desert river to wash me away.

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<sup>29</sup> Blanch, Lesley. *The wilder shores of love*. Simon and Schuster, 2010.

## WHAT KEEPS ME UP AT NIGHT

- The baby's snores and my numb right arm. She sleeps right on the vein.
- The darkness; my night light.
- Betty Friedan. That rascal with her catchy chapter titles. "The problem that has no name" or the questions housewives from decades ago ask themselves when they cannot sleep. The silent question: Is this all?
- Work. My sister-in-law has a job; my mother had a job; my other sister-in-law has a job; my mother-in-law has a job. What kind of woman am I? To stay at home while the world works? To take the baby on a walk in her stroller in the middle of the afternoon? I used to snarl at those stroller moms. Now I'm an "Is This All Mom."
- My anger. My stomach is a slow, simmering fury, like a saucepan of water and sugar. I wait for bubbles to form. I wait for the hot sugar to scald my skin.
- Arguments about my financial future. "What's your timeline?" is how the argument begins. Knowing that I haven't worked full-time long enough to get all my Social Security benefits. Knowing that if my husband died or left me I'd be destitute within a decade. Destitute might be too strong of a word. I'm being melodramatic. Kind of.
- What's a good word for "living day-to-day fearing that I'm on the brink of ruin"?
- Dr. Sears. Asshole.
- Dr. Ferber. Asshole.
- Heidi Murkoff. Ditto.
- Is the baby breathing? (Yes, she is.)
- Am I enough? (We'll see.)

## WHAT KEEPS ME UP AT NIGHT

### REFLECTIONS

Madeleine shakes a magenta plastic bowl in my face.

“Chippies,” she says.

“No more chippies,” I say for the fifth time in a row.

“Yes, chippies,” she says, tears welling up in her eyes. She’s wearing a navy velvet dress with sparkling stars embroidered on the neckline for the second consecutive day. The afternoon sun catches the curls on her head, turning them a translucent shade of blond.

Chippies refer to white chocolate chips. It’s the only food, if one can call it that, she’ll eat today. I relent and sprinkle four white chocolate chips in her bowl. Within the last week she’s started talking non-stop. Most of her conversations with me aren’t conversations at all—they are a litany of demands.

\*\*\*\*

The anxieties that haunted me when my daughter was an infant morph into new anxieties now that she’s a toddler. I’m not as obsessed with Betty Friedan and her “is this all” talk nor am I as inexplicably angry for reasons I cannot pinpoint. As she grows and changes, the concerns and worries I have

about her and about motherhood in general change, too. I continually revise the mental list I make at night.

- Did I buy twelve plastic eggs for her school's Easter egg hunt?
- Are we out of bananas?
- She'll freak in the morning if we're out of bananas.
- Do I have clean underwear? (Maybe, maybe not.)
- Did I start the dishwasher?
- Does she have enough clean diapers for preschool?
- Is the garage door closed?
- Why do I ache knowing that she needs me less and less each day?
- Can I keep my baby a baby forever?
- Am I enough? (We'll see.)



# **RECOIL**

## THE WITCH'S DICTIONARY

witch

\`wich\`

*noun*

1. Anna Moats of Suffolk, England. Criminal. In August 1645, Anna decided she'd had enough. "Fuck you, husband," she said. "Fuck you, children," she said. She screamed and she cursed and goddammit it felt GOOD. After she was arrested (her husband turned her in), she told officials the devil and his imps made her do it. "Guilty," the officials declared. "You are a witch."

*synonyms: bad wife, bad mother, bad woman*

2. Susanna Stegold of Hintlesham, England. Murderess. Mid-1600s. How the murder happened: Susanna's husband beat her daily. It was his right, his God-given duty as a man and a husband. Susanna had her powers, though. With her own force of will she killed her fattest pig. All she had to do was wish the pig dead. When she poured the poison into her husband's eggs, she wished him the same fate as her pig. She even cried out, "Die, dear husband." His mouth foamed like the mad dog she'd killed once on their farm. She was arrested. She confessed, in her guilt-addled glee, "the devil made me do it." Susanna Stegold, the witch.

*synonyms: bad wife, bad woman*

3. Susanna Smith of Suffolk, England. Attempted Suicide; Attempted

Infanticide. Mid-1600s. The devil had hunted Susanna for years. The first time he found her, he appeared in the form of a shaggy red dog. The shaggy red dog said, "Kill your children." The dog stayed with her for 24 hours. She resisted. The second time the devil found Susanna, she was in prison. She had confessed her crimes—the one about the dog—and now she must pay. The official who could help Susanna save her soul was named Robert Mayhew. "Mr. Mayhew," she begged. Her throat closed and she had to whisper her confession. "The devil appeared to me again. This time he was a black bee. The bee said, *stop eating, stop drinking.*"

Susanna refused food. She refused water. Two days later—two days of sitting alone in a dank prison cell—she had another confession for Mayhew. "The devil told me where I could find a rusty knife," she said.

"But I couldn't plunge the knife through my heart because you were in the next room." Susanna Smith, the attempted self-murderer and witch.

*synonyms: bad mother, bad woman*

4. Prisilla Collit of Dunage, England. Late 1600s. Attempted infanticide. The

devil, she told officials, made her lay her baby close to the fire place in her derelict cottage. She went to her bedroom and heard the infant cry, the smell of burning skin and hair filling her lungs. One of her other children pulled the baby from the fire. Prisilla said she'd made a covenant with the

devil. “The devil told me my financial troubles would disappear if I listened to him.” Prissilla Collit, the witch.

*synonyms: bad mother, bad woman*

5. Emily Hull (née Blackshear) of Paragould, Arkansas. Emily’s family on her father’s side, comes from England. The family name, Blackshear, derives from black shire or Blackshawe. The Blackshear coat of arms dated 1581 displays three black lions with red tongues. VIVENS UT VINCAT says the blue scroll underneath the lions. LIVING TO OVERCOME, the family motto. In 2013, while living in Stillwater, Oklahoma, Emily became a mother. There were mornings when she thought she might die from exhaustion. There were afternoons when she thought she might die by her own hand. There were nights when she cursed at her husband—when she wanted the baby’s crying to stop. Emily Hull, the witch.

*synonyms: bad wife, bad mother, bad woman*

## THE WITCH'S DICTIONARY

### REFLECTIONS

Confession: I'm a fake. A fraud. An unrepentant trickster. I've defiled one of the most useful yet banal of texts: the dictionary. This *dictionarium*, "manual or book of words," has certain rules, certain expectations. Dictionaries define words. That's it.

\*\*\*\*

Witch. *Noun*. "Witch" derives from the Old English word *wicce*, meaning "sorceress" or "female magician."

*Synonyms: hag, crone, enchantress, crone, trot, beldame*

\*\*\*\*

History tells us that when witchcraft and motherhood collide, anything can happen: imprisonment, torture, visions of the Devil himself.

\*\*\*\*

Mothers accused of witchcraft in 17th century England reacted to the circumstances of their lives—too little money, too many children, abusive husbands. A woman raising her voice at her husband or child was grounds for an arrest.

\*\*\*\*

*January, 21, 2014.* I've had enough. My baby is almost four months old and she's been crying for the last two hours. Colic. I tie and untie my Moby wrap while holding the baby close to my chest. I curse at the wrap. This long piece of

navy fabric cinched at my waist should make the crying stop. I haven't slept more than three hours a night for the last month. Insomnia. I'm slipping. Mad. Wild.

The sobbing continues. I tremble. I plead. "Stop crying. Stop crying." The baby's cries become louder. They echo. My voice rises. "Stop crying." And it rises. "Stop crying. Goddammit."

\*\*\*\*

Anna Moats lived in Suffolk, England during the 1600s. She was a self-confessed witch. In her confession, she stated before the magistrates of her village that the devil appeared before her "when she was a lone in her howse and after she had been curseinge of her husband and her childeringe."<sup>30</sup>

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Many women in Suffolk were called "witch." There were enough to catalog, to classify, to roll up into a dictionary of my own making. Some days I see myself among them.

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<sup>30</sup> The women accused of witchcraft were studied in the following article: Jackson, Louise. "Witches, wives and mothers: witchcraft persecution and women's confessions in seventeenth-century England." *Women's history review* 4.1 (1995): 63-84.

## THE IMPOTENT, INVISIBLE "I"

Baby emerges from the birth canal. Mother's old self molts, and the new self, with its gaping flesh, is born. A transformation. Delicate. Violent.

\*\*\*\*

I watch Masters of Sex, the show about sex researchers Bill Masters and Virginia Johnson, on Sunday night. The baby sleeps beside me; my husband sleeps in a different bedroom because co-sleeping, for him, is disruptive and difficult. During tonight's episode, Bill Masters clutches his face in his hands while sitting on a Crowne Plaza hotel bed, sheets crumpled from an unsuccessful attempt at sex, and bellows to Virginia, the work colleague he's sleeping with, "I'm ugly. I'm nothing. Why would anyone want to be with me? I can't even fuck."

Bill Masters never brings me to tears. He's aloof. Obsessive. Insensitive. But tonight I understand his grief. I understand his rage.

\*\*\*\*

My body hurts. I'm too exhausted to change the cheap, black yoga pants I wear to bed every night. I haven't showered in three days. I smell like sour milk and old sweat. The baby is six weeks old. The doctor says it's ok to resume my normal sex life. But I'm too ugly. Too undesirable.

\*\*\*\*

Impotence embodies disconnection. It disconnects me from my body,  
from society, from my mind.

\*\*\*\*

At Walmart, a woman cuts in front of me, her cart nearly crushing my toes.

"I'm next in line," I say.

She shrugs her shoulders.

I let it go. I shift from one foot to the other to relieve the pain in my swollen  
ankles. I walk to my car. A truck almost hits me. People press the gas pedal at  
the sight of me. I've disappeared. Into motherhood. Invisible.

\*\*\*\*

I blend into the baby. I live on my own planet, my own universe.

\*\*\*\*

Night falls. The baby sleeps in my arms. I'm Bill Masters sitting in bed  
shaking with grief for the person I used to be, wondering if I'll reappear or if it's  
too late.



## THE IMPOTENT, INVISIBLE “I”

### REFLECTIONS

I was a mother for five months before I had the emotional energy to realize I was no longer “me.” I was a ghost. A phantom. I was Gregor Samsa. Silent. Empty.

Dealing with a loss of self, a loss of identity, is one of the hardest parts of becoming a mother. Many new mothers find themselves ambivalent about motherhood and their new identities. Many new mothers, like me, left a job behind in order to care for their child. In my situation, I left a job I had ambivalent feelings towards; however, once the job no longer defined a part of my personal identity, I was adrift. Confused. Leaving one’s work behind creates mixed feelings for many women; I was no exception.

It’s impossible to know how one will cope with the rigors of caring for a new born prior to the arrival of the child. Ambivalence, an emotion new mothers commonly experience, requires minimal emotional investment; a sense of nothingness can protect the new mother from emotions that require more attention and effort. Rage, boredom, guilt, or even regret demand a certain presence of mind that ambivalence does not.

\*\*\*\*

I erased myself.

\*\*\*\*

Over time, I accepted my grief. My old self, whoever she was, vanished.



**SOUND**  
**SILENCE**

*Lying is done with words and also with silence.*

*Adrienne Rich*

## FOUND: VOICE NOTES—THREE TRANSCRIPTS

### Transcript 1

The recorded notes



### Transcript 2

*Voice field notes for first round of self-observation, May 18 - June 18*

*Unedited transcript*

**Date:** May 18, 2015

Transcription

(whispers)

The fog lingers. Where am I?

Time: 10.08p, my room, baby sleeps on my chest and breathes into phone as I record.

**Date:** May 19, 2015

Transcription

Quotes from *The Price of Motherhood: Why the most important job in the world is still the least valued*

*The good mother, the wise mother...is more important to the community than even the ablest man; her career is more worthy of honor and is more useful to the community than the career of any man, no matter how successful. Theodore Roosevelt*

*The very definition of a mother is selfless service to another. We don't owe Mother for her gifts; she owes us. And in return for her bounty, Mother receives no lack of veneration. According to an ancient Jewish proverb, God could not be everywhere, and therefore He made mothers. The Arabs also have a saying: "The mother is a school; if she is well reared, you are sure to build a nation.*

[[those qts were from Intro, p. 1. Pages rustle]]

[pp. 4-5]] war

*A woman in Texas gave up a fifteen-year career in banking to raise two children. Her husband worked extremely long hours and spent much of his time on the road. She realized that only if she left her own demanding job would the child have the parental [[mispronounced on recording]] time and attention he needed. For almost two decades she worked part-time as a consultant from her home, and for several years she had little or no income. Recently the Social Security Administration sent her an estimate of her retirement income -- a statement that was full of zeroes for the years spent caregiving. Social Security confirmed that her decision to be the responsible, primary parent had reduced the government pension by hundreds of dollars a month in retirement income."*

*[This example] reveal[s] the United States is a society at war with itself. The policies of American business, government, and the law do not reflect Americans' stated values. Across the board, individuals who assume the role of nurturer are punished and discouraged from performing the very tasks that everyone agrees are essential. We talk endlessly about the importance of family, yet the work it takes to make a family is utterly disregarded. This contradiction can be found in every corner of society.*

**Notes:** Recorded in my bedroom closet while Elena watched Maddie. 3.40p. AND...I mispronounce a word. Should re-record so I don't look like such an idiot. See also: Norman Denzin's chapter on deconstructed autoethnography in *Interpretive Autoethnography* (p. 40)

**Date:** May 20, 2015

Transcription

((Baby breathes, sleeps))

((Whispers)) Breathing.

10p Arizona time, midnight Central time

**Date:** May 21, 2015

Transcription

((Baby breathes. I whisper))

Everything's fading.

Memory.

Me.

**Date:** May 22, 2015

Transcription

Silence. Rest. ((Baby breathing))

**Date:** May 23, 2015

Transcription

I fight for my dignity every day.

**Date:** May 24, 2015

Transcription

The currency of love is time.

((Found quote in Mommy wars book)))

**Date:** May 25, 2015

Transcription

((Baby breathing))

Back home.

**Date:** May 26, 2015

Transcription

Thunderstorms tonight.

((Baby sleeps))

**Date:** May 27, 2015

Transcription

The baby's left hand rested on my heart earlier tonight.

((Baby sleeps))

**Date:** May 28, 2015

Transcription

Everything's slipping away.

**Date:** May 29, 2015

Transcription

Where does the time go?

((Whispers, baby sleeps next to me))

**Date:** May 30, 2015

Transcription

((Baby pretends to read her baby lit Pride and Prejudice book))

**Date:** May 31, 2015

Transcription

I'm weary.

((Baby sleeps))

**Date:** June 1, 2015

No notes recorded today

**Date:** June 2, 2015

Transcription

Undone. Unraveling.

**Date:** June 3, 2015

Transcription

Equality is a myth.

((Baby watches Peppa Pig before bed, 8.20p. I was supposed to go to yoga but husband came home late from work then left to work on rent house.))



**Date:** June 4, 2015

Transcription

I know why I'm filled with rage.

((Recorded while upstairs. Was changing sheets and turning down beds.))

**Date:** June 5, 2015

Transcription

Sunshine today. Warm skin. Cold heart.

((Voice quivers because baby is asleep and I didn't want to wake her. Thankfully she kept sleeping.))

**Date:** June 6, 2015

Transcription

Blue milk.

((In bed after wine dinner))

**Date:** June 7, 2015

Transcription

Exhausted.

((Baby sleeps))

**Date:** June 8, 2015

Transcription

((What my room sounds like at night with baby))

**Date:** June 9, 2015

Transcription

I'm in it alone.

**Date:** June 10, 2015

Transcription

I can't win.

((Baby sleeps))

**Date:** June 11, 2015

Transcription

--

**Date:** June 12, 2015

Transcription

--

**Date:** June 13, 2015, Sat

Transcription

Keeping up appearances.

((Baby sleeps. At my parents' home in guest room. Husband has been quick to clean up baby's every little mess when she eats. It bothers him when I don't wipe food completely off face or head. I pick my battles.))

**Date:** June 14, 2015

Transcription

Wiped out.

((Baby sleeps))

**Date:** June 15, 2015

Transcription

Finally she sleeps.

(( baby sleeps))

**Date:** June 16, 2015

Transcription

(none)

**Date:** June 17, 2015

Transcription

Allegiance to the wrong people and things.

((8.35p, Baby still awake. I was at yoga, came back, husband met me at door with baby. Said he had to go over to his mom's house. Baby sees me and starts crying. I'm sweaty and dirty. Take a 30 sec shower. PJ change, contacts out, glasses on. He rushes out the door. (We were in master bedroom.) I ask again why he's going and if all is OK. Says he doesn't know. And the power is out at rent house. So much for feeling relaxed.))

**Date:** June 18, 2015

Transcription

Depleted.

((Baby sleeps))

### Transcript 3

Edited and rearranged

Everything's slipping away.

((whispers)) The fog lingers. Where am I?

Silence. Rest. ((Baby breathing))

Sunshine today. Warm skin. Cold heart.

The currency of love is time.

I fight for my dignity every day.

*The good mother, the wise mother...is more important to the community than even the ablest man; her career is more worthy of honor and is more useful to the community than the career of any man, no matter how successful.*

Undone. Unraveling.

I can't win.

((Baby breathes. I whisper)) Everything's fading. Memory. Me.

Exhausted.

Thunderstorms tonight.

((What my room sounds like at night with baby))

Keeping up appearances.

Wiped out.

((Baby breathing)) Back home.

The baby's left hand rested on my heart earlier tonight. ((Baby sleeps))

I'm weary.

*A woman in Texas gave up a fifteen-year career in banking to raise two children. Her husband worked extremely long hours and spent much of his time on the road. She realized that only if she left her own demanding job would the child have the parental [[mispronounced on recording]] time and attention he needed. For almost two decades she worked part-time as a consultant from her home, and for several years she had little or no income. Recently the Social Security Administration sent her an estimate of her retirement income -- a statement that was full of zeroes for the years spent caregiving. Social Security confirmed that her decision to be the responsible, primary parent had reduced the government pension by hundreds of dollars a month in retirement income.*

Allegiance to the wrong people and things.

I'm in it alone.

((Baby pretends to read her baby version of Pride and Prejudice))

I know why I'm filled with rage.

Depleted.

Equality is a myth.

*[This example] reveal[s] the United States is a society at war with itself. The policies of American business, government, and the law do not reflect Americans' stated values. Across the board, individuals who assume the role of nurturer are punished and discouraged from performing the very tasks that everyone agrees are essential. We talk endlessly about the importance of family, yet the work it takes to make a family is utterly disregarded. This contradiction can be found in every corner of society.*

((Baby breathes, sleeps)) ((Whispers)) Breathing.

*The very definition of a mother is selfless service to another. We don't owe Mother for her gifts; she owes us. And in return for her bounty, Mother receives no lack of veneration. According to an ancient Jewish proverb, God could not be everywhere, and therefore He made mothers. The Arabs also have a saying: The mother is a school; if she is well reared, you are sure to build a nation.*

[[Pages rustle]]

Blue milk.

Where does the time go? ((Whispers, baby sleeps next to me))

Finally, she sleeps.

## FOUND: VOICE NOTES—THREE TRANSCRIPTS

### REFLECTIONS

I spent a month recording my field notes daily as opposed to writing them in my field notes journal. Well, I re-recorded these notes. Started over. After I lost my original voice notes, I was desperate to recoup the fragments of my daughter's babyhood that I'd inadvertently erased. There was something about the act of speaking my thoughts into my phone's voice recorder that felt more intimate and unfiltered than writing them down. When I spoke my notes, I didn't have time to linger over what I said. The thought occurred as I spoke it. Hearing myself speak my thoughts made me uncomfortable. Speaking forces an honesty within me that writing does not.

Throughout the month I recorded these notes, I usually didn't say much. There wasn't time. I was normally in bed at night and whispering my notes into my cell phone. The whole act of recording these notes made me think of the part in *Phaedrus* when Socrates says, "I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence." I transcribed each spoken note. I debated if I should use the transcription conventions I'd learned when I'd studied applied linguistics as a graduate student. Should I transcribe the rising and falling of my intonation? Should I use a stopwatch to time my pauses? After I transcribed a few of my entries in great detail, I began to wonder if my transcriptions were inept versions of what really happened the night

I said them. I began to wonder if all the transcriptions of interviews and conversations I'd spent so much effort studying as a linguist were lies (at worst) or incomplete (at best). When I write the transcription convention for a whisper, for instance, what am I actually capturing? Some whispers are louder than others; some whispers convey happiness; some whispers convey anger. Does the transcription convention ((whisper)) capture anything?

I can listen to what I said. I can see the time and date my notes were recorded. But I cannot go back in time and ask myself questions and record my responses. It's an intriguing dilemma. I have a verbatim response, in my own voice, of what happened on a certain day or night, and yet I still question it.

In the preceding essay, if one can call it that, I've presented three versions of the same transcript. The first version only has my voice files. There is no context provided. The listener hears my thoughts and is probably perplexed. The second version of the transcript offers a rough transcription but has additional written notes for context. Do the details matter? The third version, which is the only version I initially wanted to include in this dissertation, is randomly arranged. I printed out the transcript of my voice notes, cut my notes into pieces, and tossed them on the couch in my office. I closed my eyes and randomly chose quotes. I thought my random arrangement looked like a helix. Or like a breath in and out. There's a visual rhythm. A physicality to this method. The third transcript incorporates both creative and analytical thought. It's creative because the meaning isn't planned; rather, the meaning is intuited. The transcript also relies



on analytical thought for the final decisions I make about what to cut or keep or rearrange.

But which version is most accurate? In which version am I telling the truth? Each transcript requires interpretation. And interpretations may differ. The first transcript, with its voice files, offers sonic material the other transcripts do not. One can listen to, observe, and take note of the volume of my voice, the rise and fall of my intonation, the content of my spoken statements. One can listen to, observe, and take note of background noises present in the recordings—the whir of the air conditioner, the baby's snores. When I transcribed my voice field notes for the second transcript, I did so immediately. This is important to point out now that a year has passed. I listened to my voice files recently and had trouble hearing a few of my whispered statements. At the time of transcription, my utterances were fresh in my short term memory. Immediacy is important. I also wrote contextual notes—my location, the time, the date, my observations and reflections—as soon as I had recorded my note. Thus, it's easier today to remember additional details about where I was and what I was thinking and feeling because of those written notes. The third transcript contains the basic elements its predecessors, but contextual cues are omitted. The meaning of the transcript is different from the first two. However, when I go back and reread the third transcript it all feels accurate. Verifiable. Am I lying to the audience or to myself when I omit information or reshape it? Editing and reworking a text—even a spoken text—requires these steps. Writing essays or recording field notes, both spoken and written, result from the choices we make. They are a series of

decisions influenced by our tastes, our environment, our minds, and our bodies.

The truth of an event or a thought, therefore, is like light refracted through a prism. Colorful. Multifaceted. Three-dimensional.

## AN EXHAUSTED MOTHER TRIES TO HOWL

*For Amy Newman*

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by playdates, raging milk-stained lunatics,  
dragging themselves through the liquor store during naptime looking for a boozy fix,  
yoga pant clad mommy gangs wagging their fingers at the mommies in suits and heels,  
who dump their kids at daycare and disappear victorious in the supernatural darkness of the adult world,  
who bared their breast pumps to their pervy Bosses and saw Rumina and Ceres sashaying on temple roofs translucent,  
who passed the stroller moms with swinging hips and vacant eyes fantasizing about drinking a box of wine before Bible Study,  
who were expelled from the Ivory Tower where they used to work publishing opaque articles about hegemony and hermeneutics in their windowless offices,  
who slumped on the toilet in a locked bathroom, ignoring the little fingers emerging under the crack in the door,  
who got busted in their private havens retreating from Life with a shot of Valium for Solace.

AN EXHAUSTED MOTHER TRIES TO HOWL  
REFLECTIONS

*A Reading for New Mothers*



**SILENCE**

## (IN)FERTILITY

*December 11, 2012*

I give up. Give in. Surrender.

*January 1, 2013*

I eat a dozen sour cream cornbread muffins and five servings of Hoppin' John. A New Year's Day tradition. My good luck charm. I wear my loosest fitting sweat pants. I walk into the living room, chugging champagne straight from the bottle, and close the curtains. I turn on the TV. My light. I watch Dance Moms. I sit in my recliner, transfixed. Precocious little girls spin and glide. My lost daughters. Mothers quarrel. Fake eyelashes. Too long. Too thick. More champagne. The show improves.

*January 15, 2013*

I lock myself in my bathroom and sit on the toilet, holding a pregnancy test that had taken approximately 400 days, 12 hours, and 7 seconds to produce those two pink lines.

I weep.

## (IN)FERTILITY

### REFLECTIONS

Writing about infertility, no matter how brief the struggle, is hard. There's the emotional difficulty. The frustration, the guilt, the uncertainty, the anger. There's the cultural pressure—those disembodied voices on the internet, of society at large that tell a woman her story isn't good enough.

\*\*\*\*

*Monday, August 31, 2015*

I'm reading a blog post by a mother named Lindsay Cross called "Unbearable: Not Every Infertility Story Has A Happy Ending."<sup>31</sup> Cross has a child but wants another. I scroll and skim the post's 200 comments and notice an argument. Nightminx, the commenter who instigates the fight, warns the others that her comment, "is going to go down like a lead balloon."

Nightminx

this is going to go down like a lead balloon. I am sorry that you are grieving, loss is hard for everyone and no-one deserves heartache. But... You have a living, breathing, healthy child. You know what it's like to give

---

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.mommyish.com/2012/12/20/unbearable-infertility-happy-ending/2/#ixzz45MjntOP4>

birth and hold a warm baby against your chest, watch them open their eyes and know you as their mother.

Try 10 ivfs, a disappearing twin and then having to give birth to a baby you know will never breathe or look at you at 19 weeks just five days after you first felt her kick you.

I'm not trying to belittle your loss but you need to be grateful for what you have. It is so much more than many many women.

As an addendum, I went on to adopt and it is the best thing I have ever done.

Of course Nightminx's comment went down like a lead balloon. It's unnecessarily competitive and judgmental. Commenter, Justme, calls her out:

Justme Nightminx

Life is not a competition for good or for the bad. Each individual is entitled to his or her own feelings regarding the events that take place in their life. We owe it to one another to offer up condolences without serving a guilt trip alongside.

Nightminx has one person on her side, ALE.

ALE Nightminx

I know what you're saying Nightminx. I keep reading this, and I know you have to grieve, but as bad as it sounds I can't help but say to myself "At



least you have a kid!" I still don't have any, and it's frustrating and depressing too. But I would so much rather have one child then deal with infertility than have no child and dealing with infertility.....

\*\*\*\*

*Friday, April 8, 2016*

Months pass and I re-read ALE and Nightminx's comments. I continue to keep my struggle with infertility private because I cannot bear the judgement. Tonight I scan internet forums about infertility, but I don't comment, not even anonymously.

I tried and failed to get pregnant for close to a year and a half. In the scope of infertility, a year and a half wasn't very long. When I reflect on my difficulties, I relive the hopelessness. Even now as I write this, I hesitate to share my experiences. Infertility is a natural silencer.

Dear Future Me

**Letter 1**  
dated May 26, 2015  
postmarked, June 1, 2015

Dear Future Me,

Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Writer's Diary*,

"The way to rock oneself back into writing is this. First gentle exercise in the air. Second the reading of good literature. It is a mistake to think that literature can be produced from the raw. One must get out of life...one must become externalised; very, very concentrated, all at one point, not having to draw upon the scattered parts of one's character, living in the brain."

Respond to this in your next letter, Future Me.

**Letter 2**  
dated, June 9, 2015  
postmarked, June 9, 2015

Dear Future Me,

How easily I forgot Woolf's advice. I have little time for fine literature. My days are filled with non-stop toddler activities—playtime, diaper changes, and on and on. My baby loves tearing pages. I'm living in a fog. A black cloud some days. But I'll return to the quote you shared. (to give my darkest days a hint of light, if nothing else).

What will you send next, Future Me?

**Letter 3**  
dated July 7, 2015  
postmarked, July 10, 2015

You've been so quiet lately. Are you OK? Tell me your troubles. I'll listen.

Do you remember that quote from Sarah Manguso's book *Ongoingness*?

"During my pregnancy I couldn't remember anything. Information seemed to enter my memory and dissolve."

I'd like to know your thoughts. Don't forget about me.

Write Soon.  
Me

**Letter 4**  
dated Sept 18, 2015  
postmarked Sept 18, 2015  
Opened Sept 23, 2015

Dear Future Me,

What do my long silences mean? I don't know. Am I ok? Maybe. Maybe not.

Why did I forget about you?

Tell me.

~ F. M.

Me,  
what do my long silences  
mean? I don't know. Am I OK?

I forget about!

Letter #3  
May 10, 2015  
Dear Future Me,  
I'm sorry I haven't  
written to you in a  
while. I've been so  
busy with work and  
family that I haven't  
had time to sit down  
and write to you.  
I hope you're doing  
well and happy.  
I'll write to you again  
soon.

Letter #4  
Sept 18, 2015  
Dear Future Me,  
What do my long  
silences mean? I  
don't know. Am I  
ok? Maybe. Maybe  
not. Why did I  
forget about you?  
Tell me.  
~ F. M.

Letter #5  
Me,  
f long silences mean?  
I don't know. Am I  
OK? Maybe. Maybe  
not. Why did I  
forget about you?  
Tell me.  
~ F. M.

f long silences mean?  
I don't know. Am I  
OK? Maybe. Maybe  
not. Why did I  
forget about you?  
Tell me.  
~ F. M.

Letter 5  
dated Sept 23, 2015  
postmarked Sept 23, 2015

Dear Future Me,

Terry Tempest Williams wrote *When Women Were Birds* as a response to the empty journals her mother left behind after she died. The journals were bequeathed to Williams and they were filled with blank pages. What did her silence mean? Williams doesn't know. What do my long silences mean? These letters seem vain. They make me feel guilty because I enjoy writing them. I like driving to the post office. I like using my Great Uncle Ben's silver letter opener.

But guilt is powerful.

Sometimes I'm silent because the whole project seems pointless. Maybe a bit crazy. Narcissistic. Today is your birthday, Future Me. Time passes too quickly. You've wasted too much time with your silence. Speak up.

Keep going.

~ F. M.

Letter 6  
dated Oct 15, 2015  
postmarked Oct 19, 2015

Dear Future Me,

You've been quiet again. Same old story, isn't it? You've been too busy. I know. I've heard it before.

What are you waiting for? Why stall?

Write soon.

~ F. M.

Letter 7  
 dated Nov 23, 2015  
 postmarked Nov 23, 2015

Dear Future Me,

"The way to resume is to resume. It is the only way. To resume." – Gertrude Stein

I'm halfway there.

Keep going. Finish.

~ F. M.

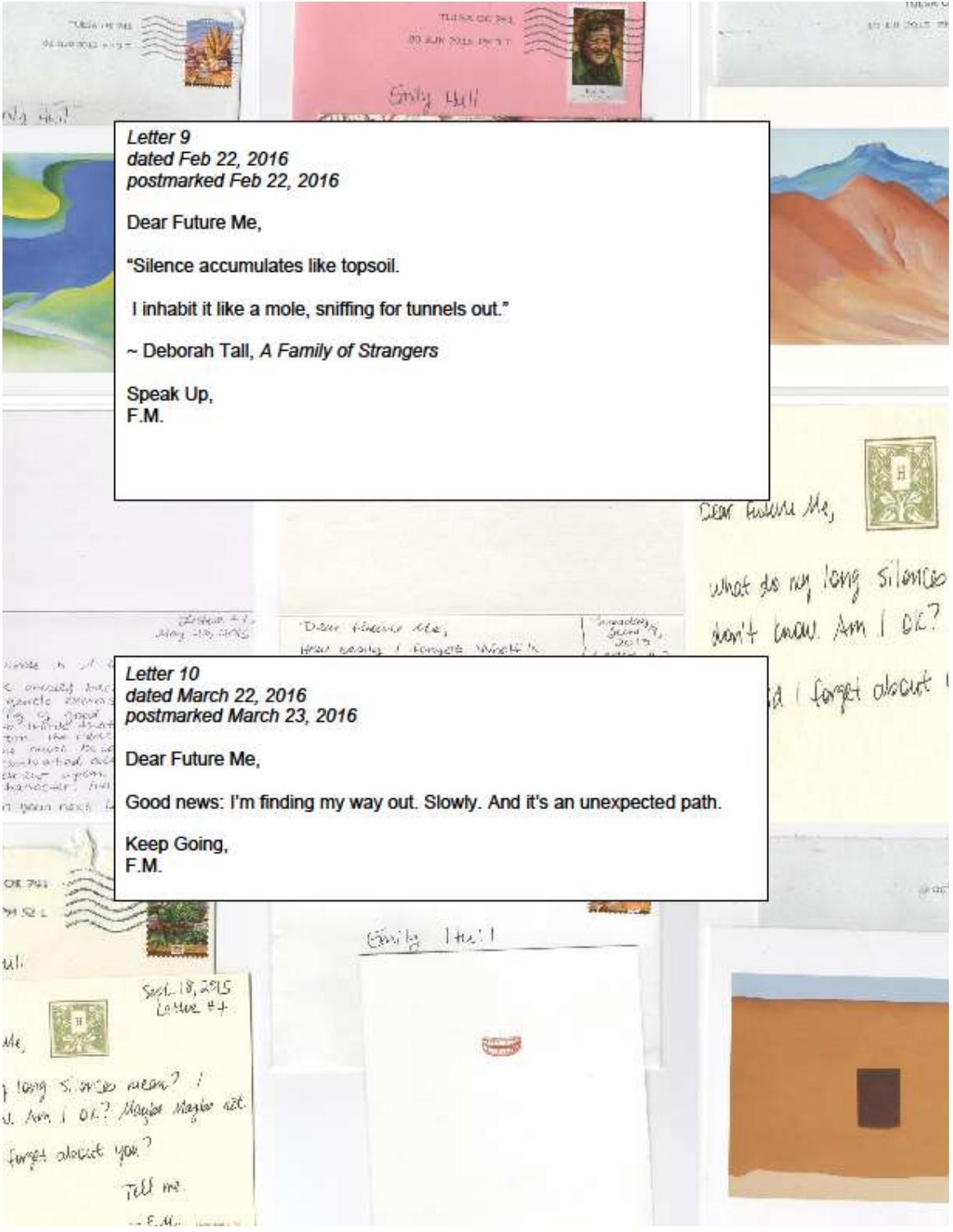
Letter 8  
 dated Jan 21, 2016  
 postmarked Jan 21, 2016

Dear Future Me,

We're drowning in this mess we've created, aren't we, Future Me? It's ok. Try to relax, alright? Remember the way Maddie pats you on the top of the head and says in her tiny, two-year-old voice, "It's ok, mommy. Don't worry." Hold on to that.

Keep Going,  
 F.M.





**Letter 9**  
 dated Feb 22, 2016  
 postmarked Feb 22, 2016

Dear Future Me,

"Silence accumulates like topsoil.  
 I inhabit it like a mole, sniffing for tunnels out."

~ Deborah Tall, *A Family of Strangers*

Speak Up,  
 F.M.

**Letter 10**  
 dated March 22, 2016  
 postmarked March 23, 2016

Dear Future Me,

Good news: I'm finding my way out. Slowly. And it's an unexpected path.

Keep Going,  
 F.M.

Dear Future Me,  
 what do my long silences  
 don't know. Am I OK?  
 I forget about you!

Letter #10  
 May 10, 2016

Dear Future Me,  
 How easily I forget myself!

Sept. 18, 2015  
 Letter #4

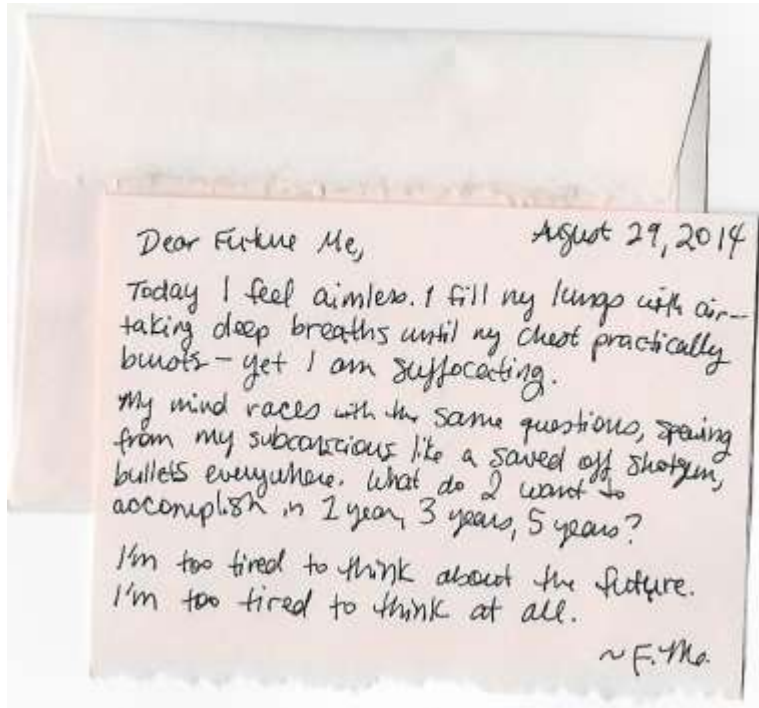
Me,

if long silences mean? /  
 I. Am I OK? Maybe. Maybe not.  
 forget about you?  
 Tell me.  
 - F.M.

## DEAR FUTURE ME

### REFLECTIONS

I read a letter I wrote to myself two years ago.



Today I wish I could have told this version of myself that life would get better—that the depression I was experiencing would lift. Roughly nine months after I wrote this letter to my future self, I started sending myself letters through the mail. I felt vain and foolish driving to the post office to mail these letters, but there was something therapeutic about receiving handwritten words of encouragement. There was a part of me that healed each time I wrote down my worries and struggles and let them go in a letter.

Letters bear witness to one's life. I witness my own self-imposed silences, my periods of despair. I witness my eventual recovery from a bleak view of the world. Letter writing offers me hope and light.

\*\*\*\*

When I was a teenager, I used to write letters to my nightmares. Writing down my fears empowered me; it gave me a voice against the dark. While I wasn't thinking of these letters when I began writing "Dear Future Me," looking back I recognize that writing about myself as a mother legitimized my experiences. Writing helped me see where I'd been and where I was presently. Writing gave me a record. *This happened. I survived.*

I often felt invisible in the early days of my daughter's life. I was consumed by her—consumed with an unimaginably intense love. A ferocious love. An agape love. My life was her. I covered myself with her care, with my attention.

But when I started writing about motherhood, I changed. I had evidence. The words scribbled in my journals or printed neatly in a letter became my trusted listener. Writing requires concentration; it requires time and focus. Writing reminded me that I was still an individual. That even though I'd never be the same again, I remained a person who thought, who mattered, who deserved compassion.





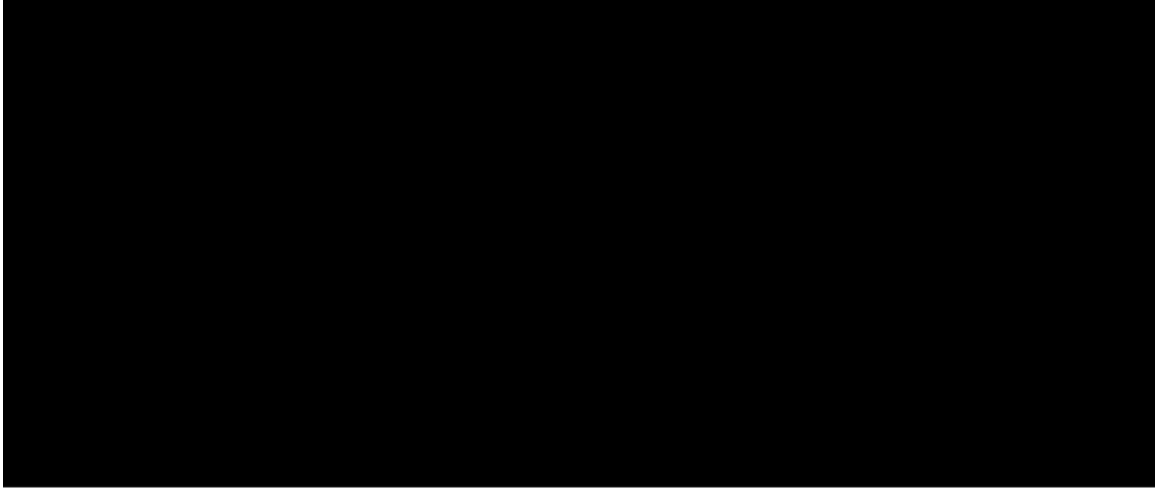


**SMELL**  
**Synesthesia**

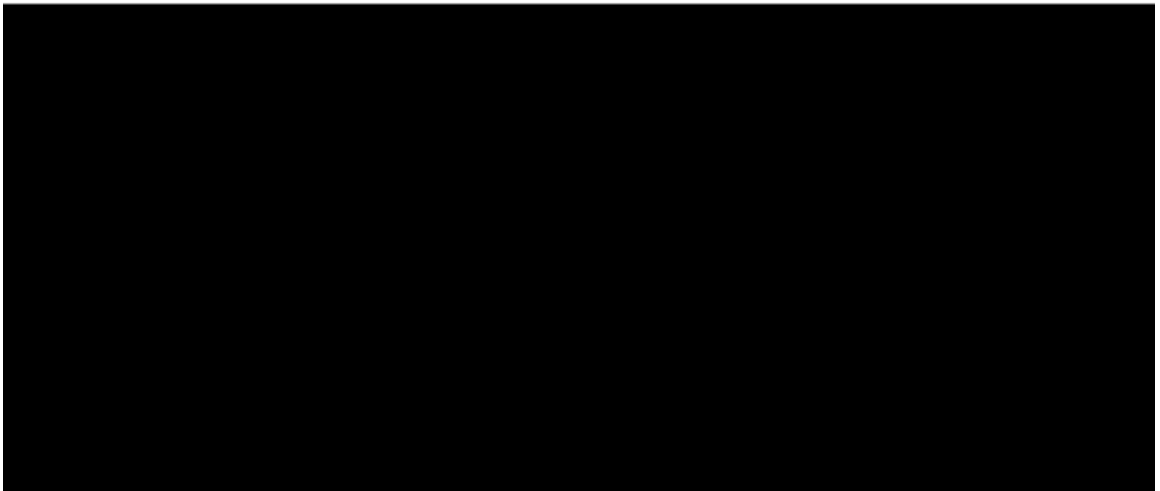
A creamy blur of succulent blue sound  
smells like week-old strawberries dropped  
onto a tin sieve as mother approaches in a  
halo of color, chatter, and a perfume like  
thick golden butterscotch.

Diane Ackerman

*A Natural History of the Senses*

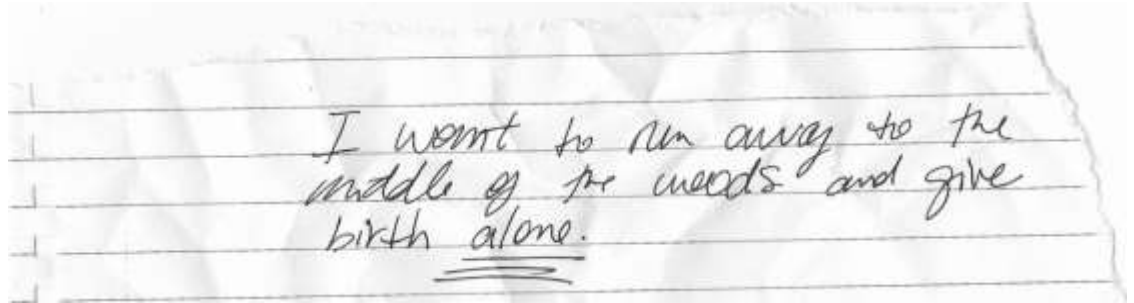


# **SMELL**



## ELEGY FOR MEMORY

I find a note I'd written to myself on my office desk one morning.



I don't remember writing that. What else have I forgotten?

\*\*\*\*

I'm in fifth grade. I walk out of the cafeteria with my friend and I pause on the sidewalk that overlooked the playground and say to her, "I don't remember my childhood." I close my eyes for a second, the sun hitting my eyelids. The world turning white.

\*\*\*\*

I read Sarah Manguso's book, *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* cover-to-cover during my daughter's nap. She describes memory as something that neither begins nor ends. It's ongoing. She writes, "left alone in time, memories harden into summaries. The originals become almost irretrievable."

\*\*\*\*

When I was an undergraduate in college, I studied Cognitive Psychology with an emphasis on memory. I followed the research of Elizabeth Loftus—a psychologist who studied false memories and eyewitness testimony. I ran an experiment for my thesis advisor that measured phantom recollection. A phantom recollection is a memory that never happened yet the person has a verbatim experience of it occurring. This can be measured simply using a list of words and a recall test. Memory is malleable and unreliable.

\*\*\*\*

I'm fifteen. I follow my mom over to my grandmother's house. My grandparents own a large piece of land and my parents built our house on the property. It only takes a minute to walk to my grandparents' house. Mom has been the one to deal with my grandmother's recent difficulties.

She refuses to let my grandfather in the house. We let ourselves in and find her in the bedroom frantically throwing clothes from her closet onto the bed.

"I'm not leaving. Don't let that man inside," she says.

After we calm her down, she walks into the living room and looks at my grandfather.

"Who's that handsome man?" she asks. "Is he staying the night?"

"That's your husband," mom says.

"Who are you?" my grandmother asks.

\*\*\*\*

Human memory is wax. Hard or soft or pure or impure—it is all the same in the end.

\*\*\*\*

Today I lament that I cannot remember how my daughter smelled when she was two hours old. In the beginning, the days and nights melted together and it was my daughter and me. As she grows and changes and throws herself on the floor in the mornings because I won't let her wear sandals in December, I grieve. I grieve because I understand that sooner than later I'll miss the tantrums and the tedious days and sleepless nights. That I will eventually forget the feeling I have right now—the headache from lack of sleep, the churning in my chest.

## ELEGY FOR MEMORY

### REFLECTIONS

This is what I remember. A man with crooked teeth and rounded shoulders and wrinkled jowls flapping against his neck leans beside a rusted pick-up truck. Inside the truck bed I see reed and seagrass baskets overflowing with ripe peaches. I wipe drool from my mouth. I'm eight or nine or ten and I reach for a peach and I'm certain I bruised it. I'm certain sticky juice stained my hands, my face, my pink cotton t-shirt. It's early summer and I am with my parents and brother. Every year we drive to the outskirts of Leachville, Arkansas for Swihart Orchard peaches. Leachville is a tattered town twenty minutes from my own ratty, railroad track hometown, Paragould. I wonder if the man knows the secret I know. That a few miles up the road there's a mansion. And inside this mansion there is a bad man. The bad man was a mobster. A mobster who retired to Leachville. Arkansas's Whitey Bulger.

\*\*\*\*

This is what I remember. A story I grew up hearing. My grandfather Ralph saw Al Capone at Happy Hollow Bath House in Hot Springs, Arkansas in the 1920s. He said Capone liked the secluded bath houses. My question then and now remains the same. Why was grandfather there?

\*\*\*\*

I call my mother and I ask her if she remembers the mobster's mansion, the one we drove by only once. The one near the man and his truck and the

peaches. It's been decades since I've seen the mansion—it was white and sunk into a hill. She doesn't recall the mobster or his mansion or the old man and his peaches. All these years later, I taste the peach and its sweetness. The stench of sugar inhabits my pores.

\*\*\*\*

Once, when I was a teenager I visited my Grandmother Hildegarde at her house and she asked me how I liked Mrs. Vicki. Mrs. Vicki was my kindergarten teacher. To my grandmother, with her decaying brain and its senile plaque, I was five. Ask me what I was doing yesterday morning at 11.43. I have no idea; probably writing in my journal with a turquoise pen that says, "What's the word" on the side in white letters or possibly tapping keys on my computer's keyboard or more likely banging my head on my desk because I couldn't think of what to write about memory.



# **SYNESTHESIA**

## MAGIC BLOOD

Today I think about blood.

I slump in a folding chair at the back of a classroom designated for Baby Bootcamp at my local hospital. I'm trying not to look at the video screen. A woman is giving birth. The sight of blood makes me lightheaded. Squeamish. Blood's scent, when it's wet and new, smells like tomato juice and dirt. Unpleasant. Bearable. But old blood reminds me of Scottish black pudding, rancid and pungent. Coagulated. Revolting.

\*\*\*\*

*Women's blood is different from the blood of men or animals. It is associated not only with the "curse" and mysteries of the menstrual taboo, but with the mana of defloration, the transformation mystery of birth, and with fertility itself.<sup>32</sup>*

\*\*\*\*

Blood is fear; blood is mystery; blood is existence.

\*\*\*\*

I remember a story.

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<sup>32</sup> Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. WW Norton & Company, 1995. (p. 117)

Once upon a time there lived an Aztec princess charged with guarding her warrior husband's gold. One day invaders broke into her palace.

"Give me the gold," they demanded.

She, the virtuous wife, refused.

The men surrounded her.

"Give me the gold," the ringleader said, taking his sword from its sheath.

"Never," she said.

The ringleader stood next to her. She heard the gentle "thud" of his heart as his sword sliced her neck.

Her faithfulness did not go unnoticed. The gods knew. Quetzalcoatl knew. Quetzalcoatl, benevolent god, reached from the heavens and embraced the princess' lifeless body. From his hands dripped her blood. When her blood united with the earth, a tree started to grow. This tree, with its lanky branches and oblong pods, was called the cacao tree. The cacao tree's fruit—fleshy and white and sweet and bitter—mirror her sacrifice, her power, her blood.

\*\*\*\*

I take a deep breath. The woman is still on the screen. The baby's head pushes its way through the birth canal. Blood gushes from the mother's body. I vomit.

\*\*\*\*

The ancient Aztecs believed that when cacao pods bled, new life was created. For the Aztecs, a woman's blood was holy and magical. There was no disgust or fear. She was celebrated.

\*\*\*\*

I'm in a hospital bed. I'm on my back and I'm pushing and I'm bleeding. My baby's head begins to crown. Once she breaks free from my body, the doctor places her in my arms. I kiss the top of her slick head—energized from the blood that lingers on my lips.

MAGIC BLOOD  
REFLECTIONS

Today I think about blood.

I watch a butterfly hover above violet impatiens in the backyard. My phone buzzes. It's my father.

"We finally know what might be wrong with your brother. The doctors think he has lymphoma. Blood cancer," he says.

I think about the time my brother and I slipped Brussel sprouts and lima beans to our basset hound when we were little. Dad would catch us and wait at the table until we finished our vegetables. I'd distract Dad and my brother would toss the lima beans he didn't want on the floor. We were co-conspirators. Dedicated trouble-makers. Fun-havers.

The doctors are wrong. My brother is healthy and young.

Two days later, I answer a phone call from my mother and know within seconds the news about my brother hasn't improved.

She sobs and gasps and manages to say, "It's leukemia. I wish it were me."

"It'll be alright, Momma. He'll be fine," I say, trying to reassure her.

For the first time in our relationship as mother and daughter, I completely understand how she feels. I remember the night my baby ran a 104-degree fever. My fingers shook when I dialed our pediatrician's number. My voice creaked. I stopped breathing. Choked from panic. I imagine how I'd react if my daughter had cancer. If the doctor told me she might die. I'd wretch. Convulse. Dissolve.

\*\*\*\*

I'm folding towels in my laundry room while my daughter naps. A woman from the cancer hospital calls me.

"You're a *haplo*, a half-match for your brother," the woman says. "Do you want to be his donor?"

"Of course," I say.

Suddenly, a memory flashes in my mind. My brother is a toddler. My daughter's age. He's plump and blonde. I poke his squishy belly and dress him up in a cotton candy pink leotard and tutu. We hold hands and spin and laugh.

\*\*\*\*

I'm sitting in the passenger side of my dad's truck holding a thermos of herbal tea. We are driving 300 miles this morning to the cancer hospital in St. Louis where I'll undergo a series of tests to prepare my body for stem cell donation.

Dad and I chat about everything but my brother for two hours. Then the conversation turns abruptly to my brother's first night in the hospital.

"Your brother was heavily medicated and I thought he was sleeping. He woke up for a few minutes, looked at me from his hospital bed and whispered, 'I don't want to die, Daddy.' "

"I don't think you should tell me these things, " I say, spilling hot tea on my lap.

\*\*\*\*

Blood is fear; blood is mystery; blood is existence.

\*\*\*\*

I'm sitting in the pheresis consultation room at the cancer hospital. Two nurses examine the veins in my arms. My veins are weak. Collapsible. They schedule me for port surgery.

\*\*\*\*

I'm lying on an operating table. An IV drips. My vision softens. Kaleidoscopic. The beige walls hum. The room's bright lights feel silky. Soft like a mink stole.

A needle stings my upper chest. The doctor slices my neck and inserts a port into my jugular vein.

\*\*\*\*

*What we carry in the blood bestows gifts as well as dangers.*

There's a chance my brother's body will reject my stem cells. That my cells will attack his.

\*\*\*\*

My head floats from fentanyl. I'm riding in the backseat of my parents' car and I'm bleeding. Blood pouring from my body. My daughter's birth. I kiss her head. My lips turn crimson. She's syrupy, metallic. Like pennies soaked in fine wine.

\*\*\*\*





## SECTION III

### ENDINGS AND CONTINUATIONS

I'm a seeker, a traveler. A mother on a quest. For understanding. For truth. Truth is a shapeshifter. Seductive. Dangerous. Truth partly relies on human memory, which adjusts itself and its recollections according to one's personal point of view and emotions. Truth also relies on facts—on verifiable information. Truth's allure in evocative autoethnography and creative nonfiction writing is its promise to readers that the words on the page happened. But this allure is truth's poison. The writer can easily invent details and characters and embellishments designed to intentionally deceive the reader. However, the writer may invent details and characters and embellishments to add texture to a personal memory that's true but foggy.

Writers of autoethnography or creative nonfiction recognize the difference between stories that are sentimental and private versus stories that are personal and publically shareable. Sentimental and private stories belong in our notebooks where the only reader is ourselves. Personal stories, contrastingly, are written for an audience. They are meant to be read. Autoethnographic writing has the unique quality of incorporating both fact gathering and systematicity in its methodology and personal storytelling that can encompass a multitude of forms. My goal in this dissertation, for instance, was to place the personal in communication with the cultural—to take elements of those stories that are meant to be private and write them in such a way that they are shareable with an audience interested in my topic. In my view, I take a ‘look-over-my-shoulder-and-see-what’s-in-my-mind’ approach.

\*\*\*\*

I’m Clifford Geertz in Bali.

Bali, the place he calls *its own world*. The place that makes him feel like a *nonperson, a specter, an invisible man*.

\*\*\*\*

I’m 28 again and I’m deep in the Bucks County woods, dark and deep and unlovely at dusk. Four hours pass on the running trail and I’m free. I’m free of cell phone, of identification, of spare change. When I left my friends’ cabin earlier today, I told them that I’d be gone for at least two hours on a 13 mile run. They said to turn left at the sign with a cat on it. Pussy Pines. I can’t miss it.

I missed it. I outran a mangy farm dog that chased me down a gravel road. An hour passed and I started worrying about the Pussy Pines turn. I tried retracing my steps. The same dog chased me three or four more times before finding her way home. I kept running; I kept traveling deeper into the woods. Eventually I found a clearing and turned right. I ran up a hill and saw a weathered sign made of rotting wood. Pussy Pines, thank God.

It wasn't Pussy Pines. The sign dangled on a post and was hand-painted in fading purple letters. "Winery -> this way" I accelerated my pace. I'd use the winery's phone while sipping on a glass of Cab. I approach a building that might have been a winery. It's scorched. No winery here. I run down the hill and back to the clearing. I repeat. And repeat. I become an expert of the hill and the winery sign. Soon a silver minivan drives up beside me and a woman asks for directions to the winery. I don't ask for a ride. Instead, I do the natural thing and give her detailed directions. I begin to accept that no one will find me. It's starting to get dark. I hear a rustle in a bush nearby. Bear? Wolf?

I walk towards the winery, defeated.

My husband and our friends eventually find me sulking on the winery's road to nowhere. But before they found me, I was the last human alive. Alone. Irreversibly isolated. I could cry or whistle or sing and dance. And the outcome was the same. The Bucks County woods was practically my home—my final resting place had I not been discovered on the hill.

Those woods resurfaced in my mind during my daughter's first year of life many times. I resided in my own world. I was a nonperson, a specter, an invisible woman.

Isolation was a mortal. Silent. Dark. Cold. She followed me. Became part of me, a phantom limb.

Isolation has a pulse. A heartbeat. She lurks in my dissertation's essays. She refuses to release me. I am both insider and outsider; I am both informant and foe. Autoethnography allows unfiltered access to one's innermost thoughts and beliefs. It provides unrestricted entry into a culture, new motherhood, that's known for being publically cagy and judgmental and privately honest and candid. But does this accessibility come at a cost? When does the autoethnographer decide to stop observing? To stop recording field notes? How does the autoethnographer determine who will appear in the narrative as characters? In my case, I intentionally focused on *my experiences* as a new mother. In my view, including too many details about my husband and my daughter as characters detracted from the point I attempted to make. New motherhood is an island. It is Tristan da Cunha—far flung, remote.

\*\*\*\*

Twenty, thirty, forty years from now I'll be able to better articulate how profoundly motherhood changed everything about my life.

I'm too close to my own metamorphosis to grasp what it all means. Before I was a mother, there were no late nights worrying about a baby's cough (*is it*

*Croup? Is it pneumonia? Is it bronchitis?*) or how she was positioned in the bassinet (*Is she on her back? Is she suffocating in the corner? Can I prevent SIDS?*). There was no worrying about being in complete control over the well-being and survival of another human who was helpless and who would certainly die without my care and attention.

The gravity of what and who I've become hasn't fully materialized in my consciousness. And maybe it never will.

But I can reflect. I can bend back and create enough distance to see and hear and empathize with my new mother self. Writing these essays and reflections has been an arduous task. I've spent many hours agonizing over how best to present my experiences. On the one hand, I don't want to come across as a person who was enrobed only in sadness and who experienced no joy with her baby. On the other hand, motherhood is a multi-faceted experience complete with extreme highs and extreme lows. Many of my essays cover the lows—my personal darkness; some of my essays cover brighter moments. The reflections help alleviate both the reader and me from the tyranny of the low moments new motherhood brings: the postpartum depression, the self-doubt, the angst and anxiety. They have allowed me to pay close attention to the joyous moments I've shared with my baby. Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I've come to recognize that I've been contending with two versions of myself. Many of the essays I've presented in this dissertation were developed with material from my bout with postpartum depression. As I was writing the reflections for the

essays, I had to create personal distance in order to reflect upon the past and discover new meanings about my life and its relationship to new motherhood.

As I finish writing my autoethnography, I think about how withdrawn I was in the early days of new motherhood. I was completely immersed within my baby's life and her care. I didn't make time, or have much time, for outside interactions. I didn't ask for help. It was only after I started writing my reflections that I began to believe that I was part of something bigger, that I was embedded within a network of other people, of a culture all along. This interplay of awareness—from being withdrawn and isolated to becoming mindful that I wasn't alone in my experiences—is the result, if not the embodiment of, practicing self-reflexivity. The process I have described—of retracting inward in order to gain a broader perspective of the self and the culture in which one resides—is a metaphor for the process of writing an autoethnography.

One of the difficulties I usually have when writing personal pieces in the first few drafts is hiding behind research or facts instead of facing whatever my story is *really* about. It's challenging for me to reveal my vulnerabilities and transgressions and frailties. I constantly battle an inner voice that hisses, "What will other people think of you if they find out that's how you are and those are the choices you've made?" These questions evoke self-consciousness and fear, making it nearly impossible to write honestly. To me, autoethnography's greatest strength as a method for exploring the self is its dogged insistence that the writer relentlessly examines who she is and why she thinks or feels the way she does from a variety of perspectives. Using items from the anthropologist's

methodological toolkit, so to speak, such as field notes and self-observation freed me as a writer who tends to censor herself to become a writer who had no choice but to be forthright. As I added to my field notes over the last two years, there was not time for me to over-analyze what I was revealing. I simply kept going. I wrote my notes whenever I was depressed or bored or angry or awed. I gave myself permission to be uncomfortable when I recorded my field notes. Hearing my voice, even when it was late at night and in a whisper, provided me with personal insights I otherwise would not have known were there.

Evocative autoethnography excavates the mind; it “zooms in” to the personal and “zooms out” to the cultural, just as Ellis says. Evocative autoethnography’s challenge, however, remains the manner in which the writer chooses to express these self-revelations and findings. Perhaps this is also the challenge of postmodernism: if anything goes, if all modes of expression are relative and valid because there is no ultimate truth or objectivism, then what will the final written expression look like? How readable will it be? Will the written pieces that result from autoethnography address the basic needs of the audience? What are the audience’s needs? Evocative autoethnography should challenge readers; it should summon an emotional response to the text; it should, in my opinion, move readers to engage and even struggle with the text.

My autoethnography has a rhythm—a systematicity. The essays and reflections result from the detailed and systematic field notes and observations I gathered for two years. I examined my notes and observations in the same manner I would examine and analyze qualitative data for an ethnographic

project. But I had the opportunity to present my findings in an experimental mode. I deliberately chose to create pieces that followed non-chronological structures to best represent my lived experiences as a new mother.

Motherhood is messy and wild and unstructured. Its shape, if motherhood has a shape, is amorphous and pliable like melted glass. My essays and reflections, when considered as a whole, slither along the serpentine road of my memories, my struggles. I offer no singular narrative about new motherhood. While there is a clear beginning point—the point when life first flickers in my womb—there is no plot, no moment of release, no dénouement. The autoethnographic “I” exists in many modes: collage essays, braided essays, faux interviews, real interviews, and birth plans, imagined dictionary entries, poetry, and handwritten letters. These experimental modes represent my truest self; they mirror my internal voice and are more honest than anything else I could imagine myself writing.

But honesty isn't without its thorns. The practice and *praxis* of writing an autoethnography isn't an act that can necessarily be summed up, described—packaged up in a tidy set of guidelines. The writing journey is ongoing, open-ended—just like motherhood.



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