

Parts We Didn't Know We Had

By

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## Abstract

Since the success of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, feminist authors and activists alike have proven that "the personal is political," and non-fiction writers have found a powerful tool in life narratives by contradicting or interrupting cultural scripts of identity. However, despite the plethora of cultural scripts that have been re-written for women, the reality of one in particular, motherhood, is "kept carefully shrouded in silence, disinformation, and outright lies," to quote Susan Maushart in *The Mask of Motherhood*.

After I became a mother, in the spring of 2005, I experienced a year of endless frustration, despair, anger, isolation, sadness, guilt, and resentment, culminating in the lowest depth of depression I have faced. It was not until I began writing about my experiences and researching those of others that I began to heal. Luckily, I was not alone. Since the turn of the century, in the middle of my own personal crisis, an outpouring of autobiographical books on motherhood have been published, with more coming out each year than the one previous.

In the spirit of the essay, this collection provides a point of intersection for many different things; it reflects the style of writers such as Adrienne Rich, who remembers her 1976 book *Of Woman Born*, "was both praised and attacked for what was sometimes seen as its odd-fangled approach: personal testimony mingled with research, and theory which derived from both." This in-between-ness with regard to research and creative writing, literature and theory, process and product is the prose thesis for my M.F.A. in English.

# parts we didn't know we had

*a mother's search under the surface*

maria polonchek

*To Luke and Taj,  
who helped me build a stronger foundation  
on which to stand,  
and  
To Sola,  
our reinforcement.*

### *Acknowledgements*

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I'm always gonna want to blow your mind.

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*Take a small notion and find the universe in it.*

--Susan Orlean

*Be truthful, one would say, and the result  
is bound to be amazingly interesting.*

--Virginia Woolf

*Nothing quite has reality for me till I write it all down.*

--Erica Jong

## Introduction, In Eleven Parts

### i.

One icy February morning over a decade ago, I was backing my old Toyota from the drive as a dull pink sunrise crept up an overcast sky. I was a student, attending a small community college in the suburbs, living with family to cut expenses, and working part-time at a coffee shop. I had the early shift and was responsible for opening by 6:00. I've never considered myself a morning person, but I took the work seriously; it seemed critical to prepare those tired, stressed, important people for their workdays by serving caffeine and laughter and I felt I was just the person for the job.

It was the day after Valentine's Day, a holiday I've never cared to celebrate, and not just because of obvious reasons one has when she is single. Even now that I'm partnered-up, Valentine's Day seems to be a tradition that makes an already-complicated life even more complicated. It's set-up for disappointment, as far as I'm concerned (how many couples end the day with arguments and hurt feelings?) and encourages insincerity. Why not shower people with love and attention when you really feel like it? When they really need it? Why turn it into an expectation?

But I digress. It was a Thursday—trash day—and trashcans lined the street. At the end of each drive sat two plastic bins, side-by-side, in varying shades of beige and grey. I glanced down the street at the long row of houses, also in varying shades of beige and grey, and took note: nope, no one forgot trash day. They never did in Deer Creek, a place where the only deer you'll see are the ones lying dead by the side of the road.

As I cranked the wheel to the left and looked behind my shoulder, something red and vibrant caught my eye. In the driveway of the house across the street, on this looming morning in February, in the neighborhood of beige and grey, atop the trash sat a dozen fresh red roses, bow still attached.

My first thought was that they were beautiful, though I'm more of a wildflower-kind-of-girl. Red has always been my favorite color. Then I wondered what the story was. I didn't know who my neighbors were—didn't even know their names and never found out. But they had a story, and part of it involved fresh red roses on top a trash bin the day after Valentine's Day. I felt voyeuristic, indulging in what was supposed to be a private detail of their story. No one was supposed to know about this scene, except the giver of the roses, the receiver, and maybe the garbage man. And, my God, the power of the moment. I'll never forget how silent the dawn, how sharp the air, how pink the horizon and red the roses against an otherwise monotonous backdrop. How simultaneously devastating and beautiful the scene was and how I felt isolated from, yet connected to, these strangers who were also my neighbors.

## ii.

It seems I'm not the only one interested in the lives of others, as demonstrated by the recent influx of documentaries, memoirs, and "reality" shows. While I enjoy all these mediums from time to time, I watch them warily, knowing whoever needs to cash in on our voyeuristic tendencies insures that these "true-life" stories are full of overt tension, drama, and excitement. It's too bad, I think; the quiet draw of everyday people around me is just as interesting: their carts in the grocery store, their conversations on the sidewalk, their trashcans at the edge of the drive.

Perhaps what I'm searching for is something by which I can measure my own experience, with the people around me serving as the most appropriate gauge. My fascination with in the lives of others seems to be equally about identification (with those who are similar) and understanding (for those who aren't). I'm especially interested in the inner life. Recalling her motivation for writing *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedman said, "There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform." I find her claim applicable to most realities of "private" life, regardless of one's gender. Many of the experiences we believe are private—marriage, motherhood, mental illness—are shaped by hackneyed representations, stifling institutions, and worn-out public policies. Often, I sense a disconnect in people, an unwillingness to admit public influences on private experiences, and I fear this disconnect is detrimental to living an authentic life.

If I had a different imagination, I'd take what I found in my undercover work and make up my own stories—fiction—giving friends and family peace of mind that I'm not jotting down what they do and say in hope of publishing it for the world to read. After all, as Northrop Frye says in *The Educated Imagination*, "Our impressions of human life are picked up one by one, and remain for most of us loose and disorganized. But we constantly find things in literature that suddenly coordinate and bring into focus a great many such impressions." But invention is not my strong suit: when my children ask for stories from their grandmother, they go on adventures with their pretend ponies, Sugar and Apple. With their father, they befriend an imaginary Teddy the Turtle. When they're stuck with me, they know to gently request I attempt something other than rehashing our recent trip to the doctor's office.

Because I just can't make things up, I write personal non-fiction. I have to write *something*: if words are clothing for the soul, mine is in need of a walk-in closet. I am the product of a union between two published writers. I'm surrounded by words, in my mind and on my bookshelves. As far as I can remember I've had a need, a compulsion, to recollect my experiences, disassemble everything about them, and build them back up into more complex meaning. I don't have the nifty filter most of my friends do that keeps me from sharing Too Much Information and am willing to tell anyone almost anything. My need to write, my lack of both imagination and filter, and my belief in the place for private discourse in the public world, coalesce in personal essays.

### iii.

To be clear, I don't write about my experiences because I think my life is particularly interesting or unique. Rather, I share precisely because I think I'm *not* unique. The father of the essay, Michael de Montaigne, declared in the sixteenth century, "Every man has within himself the entire human condition." Regardless of my belief that we all have an intuitive understanding of what Aristotle called the "universal human event," I realize essayists have been called all sorts of names: narcissists, egoists, and presumptuous navel gazers, to name a few. Because of all the criticism, I'm embarrassed when people ask what I write: when I say "non-fiction" and particularly "personal essays," the exasperation in the inquisitor's eyes is almost audible. *Who do you think you are?* Defining the subject of my writing is even more difficult: "motherhood" sounds too sentimental, "having twins" sounds too trendy, "cultural criticism" sounds too academic, and "depression" sounds too...well, depressing.

The problem is, the complexity of these topics deters summary, and all are inextricably linked, which is why I find them worth writing about and why I choose the essay as the genre in which to write. Stylistically, essays mirror the way my life has taken shape. Essays are short and self-contained; perhaps a collection is united by a theme, but each essay is also able to stand on its own. They're incremental. They wander. They're a bit scattered. Their form—or, more often, lack thereof—exemplifies my current mode of existence. As a mother, wife, friend, academic, artist, athlete—always defined by my relationship to others or how I spend my time—my life sometimes feels compartmentalized and conducive to a short attention span. I have a feeling I'm not alone.

#### iv.

Indeed, it's reading the stories of others and writing some of my own that has helped me, in part, recover from the most debilitating bouts of depression I've faced to date. It's no secret that my first pregnancy wasn't planned. Not just the part about it being twins, but the whole kit-and-caboodle. Chris and I had known each other four months when a pregnancy test confirmed our suspicions and we spent our first anniversary peering into a bassinet that held two sleeping babies. I was absolutely unprepared for motherhood. And having twins didn't help the transition.

*Ah, one might speculate. So this is a post-partum-thing.* Only it's not. Dare I say I wish it were? At least that would give me a clear place to begin when I recount my struggle with depression. A story is difficult to tell when one is unsure of the beginning and end. Depression has been a life-long companion of mine. Since adolescence, I have identified with several technical terms I've heard reference specific points on the

spectrum of depressive disorders. I experienced dysthymia, which is also known as low-level depression or minor depression. At points I have experienced manic-depression, with bouts of enthusiasm, creativity, and production interspersed with bouts of lethargy, apathy, and insomnia. And, count me as being one of the 15 % of women who give birth in the United States to suffer from some level of post-partum depression. I'm so familiar with depression and her fluctuations, I almost consider her a friend—a real downer, with no sense of humor—but still, a friend.

*Depression.* The word alone makes me want to recoil and lower my voice to a whisper. I don't react this way because I'm embarrassed to have experienced it. It's just that I hear variants of the word tossed around so frequently, I'm not sure any of us know how to properly use it. I don't even know how to describe it precisely, the unmanageable burden of despair that feels as if I carry in my chest the entirety of the world's suffering. It's difficult to talk about depression in a culture where the term and theories for treatment are everywhere, and vary widely.

Case in point: Recently, as I walked to work on a college campus, I passed two students having a conversation (and, of course, I listened in.) One girl was describing her recent weekend excursion to the other saying, “and they, like, ran out of OJ, so, like, no screwdrivers, and I was, like, totally depressed.” (Sometimes, in my non-fiction writing, I exaggerate things or make them up to prove a point. This is not one of those times.) This stranger and I do not have the same definition for “depression.”

Even as a child, I was accompanied by Worry, who would eventually introduce me to her more powerful acquaintances. I was energetic and enthusiastic, but whenever I caught wind of the more adult dilemmas around me, I couldn't get them off my mind. I

often blamed myself for the problems of others, from my father's drinking, to my siblings' trouble in school, to strangers on the television, who I didn't realize were actors. (Perhaps this explains my "over-protectiveness" when it comes to the mature content my own children see and hear, especially on T.V.) I wanted so badly to fix everyone around me. I was emotional as well, and I still am now--raw with emotion. No poker face. And the constant self-analysis. I can only imagine the relief of living in a mind where one is free from such self-directed criticism.

It was in junior high that I established the long-held habit of escaping to the nearest bathroom to curl up on the toilet seat and sob. The summer before eighth grade, I experienced what I call "the crushing" for the first time. I don't remember what prompted the particular dive into sadness, but a seemingly normal adolescent problem—with a boy, a friend, my parents—veered into a kind of despair that took my breath away. I distinctly recall thinking *People all over the world are desperately hurting. Right now. I can feel it.* What began as a desire to fix problems around me, turned into an obsession with the suffering of other people. If I didn't have any clear problems of my own, I quickly turned to the problems of others, whether I knew them or not. My old friend, Worry, invited over her more constant friend, Anxiety, and rotating unease kept me awake at night. When I did sleep, it never felt deep or substantial enough to dream. I woke easily and often and felt like I hadn't slept at all when morning came.

In high school, I began to experience a steady, dull pulling between my neck and lower back of my head. Because my family constantly hovered around poverty (which, of course, caused me worry) and I knew we couldn't afford a doctor, I was hesitant to complain. When I finally told my mom and saw a doctor, he diagnosed them as "tension

headaches” and prescribed muscle relaxers, which did little to help. One of the lesser-known physical symptoms of depression is chronic aching—a soreness in the muscles and headaches.

Not even consciously, I developed behaviors to disguise what was suffocating me inside. By the time I was in my early twenties, I had figured out how to entertain people—how to make them laugh, ask them questions, tell wild stories of drunken escapades. I developed a chameleon-like way to fit in, wanting so badly to be liked and accepted. I wove in-and-out of religion, joining Bible studies and swearing off alcohol and sex. Other times, I’d play “wild-child” and get so drunk that when I woke, I didn’t know how I arrived at my resting place nor what had happened in the hours before. I was involved in highly dramatic, highly dysfunctional relationships, with the only thing steady about them being the frequency with which I went from one to the next.

v.

“Start with the edge pieces; make a frame,” I hear my husband, Chris, tell our twin sons, Luke and Taj, as they try to put together their first puzzle. I think of how I try to do this with depression, but I’m so unsure of the edges, the beginning and end. I try to coax answers from the hazy fog that is my childhood, insomnia-ridden nights of my adolescence, or the blurred, swirling discotheque of my early twenties. It’s my tendency to want clear answers, obvious places to categorize my experiences and feelings, and a lucid path leading to them so I can point to and say, “See, this thing that happened in fourth grade? That’s what’s made me so insistent that the toilet paper on the dispenser spins counter-clockwise.”

To explain my depression, I can point to places on both sides of the nature-versus-nurture debate. My maternal great-grandmother received electric shock therapy in the days of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and, later, asked for more. My mother has been upfront about her own struggle since I can remember. I could also point to social influence or to my home life when I was growing up. But because of my strong emotional reaction to events, I have a tendency to misinterpret, misremember, or just plain get things mixed up. Even when a scene is clear in my mind, I have learned to be skeptical of memory, especially when “the crushing” is deep. It’s ironic, my passion for writing non-fiction, because I rely heavily on memory and mine isn’t very good.

Emotions play an essential role in forming memories. It’s natural for us to have a clearer picture in our minds when there is a strong emotion tied to an event. For most people, this is true for happiness *or* sadness. For me, well... I remember the dress I wore when I graduated high school, who I was with the first time I saw the ocean, and what my husband ordered on our first date; but the majority of my past is so associated with anxiety, hopelessness, and despair that I’ve blurred it together with big, empty white panels of time that sit in silence, dividing the haze.

For reasons still unclear to me, I didn’t take my own depression seriously before I had children. When I suspected a friend or family member was struggling with it, I encouraged them to get help, whether it meant taking medication, seeing a therapist, or making more holistic changes through nutrition and exercise. But when it came to my own experience, I felt I had no control. Before I had the twins, I’d been in and out of psychologists’ offices for a decade, only to decide I couldn’t handle it, sometimes

financially, sometimes emotionally, after one visit. Twice, I have gone as a support for another person, only to be told by the doctor that it is I who urgently needs treatment.

Depression seemed to be a fact of my life, and I felt powerless over her hold. Over the years, I'd check in with the Beck Depression Inventory, a questionnaire developed by Dr. Aaron Beck in 1978, to determine the existence and severity of depression. I would rank my symptoms, on a scale of 0-3. *I do not feel sad. I feel sad. I am sad all of the time and I can't snap out of it. I am so sad that I can't stand it.* Repeat with 21 symptoms, ranking levels of discouragement, hopelessness, guilt, blame, and irritability. I always had high scores, but, until depression became physically debilitating, after I had the twins, I just assumed my high scores were my version of “normal.”

## vi.

I was struggling through a spell of manic-depression when I met Chris. We didn't exactly take things slow—our first date was April Fool's Day, we moved in together by June, and concluded July with a cross-country trip to meet the relatives—but despite my elation in meeting him, I continued to feel the weight of depression like a chain around my ankles.

To anyone else, I must have seemed fine. I was fresh in love, holding down a full-time job, exercising in the morning, and socializing at night. But I felt addicted to approval and channeled my addiction towards Chris: when I wasn't with him, I felt alone, abandoned, and insecure. I barely slept at night, had crying spells in the bathroom at work, and couldn't make even the smallest decisions.

Then I got pregnant, and it all got much worse.

It was during pregnancy that I began to think I might need anti-depressants, but I was obsessed with keeping my body as “pure” as possible. I drank organic milk, swallowed black-strap molasses instead of iron supplements, and planned a drug-free birth: it was not the time to experiment with anti-depressants. In my third trimester, I waddled into the office of yet another psychologist, explaining to her that I did not want to take any drugs, but couldn’t she please help me, because—see how I’m crying now?—I’ve been crying like this every day for most of my life and I can’t seem to stop.

She said cognitive therapy wasn’t enough for me at that point and she couldn’t help me unless I started some type of medication. I told her I’d think about it, took her copy of *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, and promised her I would return it once I bought my own. I never went back and she never sent a bill.

The first year after the twins were born, I quit my job to stay home with them and experienced an endless cycle of frustration, despair, anger, isolation, sadness, guilt, and resentment, culminating in paralyzing depression. At that point, *depression* didn’t seem like anything close to describing the hopelessness I felt. I never considered suicide, but often believed it wouldn’t matter to anyone if I died. I thought the sadness alone might kill me and I wouldn’t have to do anything. Something in my mind felt broken, beyond repair. What I can admit, now that I realize how wrong I was, is that I believed having the twins had ruined my life.

It’s not uncommon for people to perceive depression as a personal shortcoming, those who suffer from it and even those who don’t. I saw myself as a failure and felt ashamed. What right did I have to be unhappy? I wasn’t abandoned: not only did I have a partner, but he’s nurturing to the children and loves me, despite my obvious flaws. I

wasn't too young to have children: I reminded myself constantly that my mother and grandmother had become mothers before they reached twenty. I wasn't without financial support: we weren't rolling in money, but we had the fundamentals and what we didn't have, our parents helped with. On the outside it appeared I had everything I needed to thrive in my new role as mother, so I mumbled something about "post-partum blues" or "hormone adjustments," to anyone who asked how I was doing.

I clung to Chris, my sudden husband who, in so many ways, was still a stranger to me, and avoided everyone else. When social responsibilities determined that I had to be in the presence of anyone other than immediate family, I developed ways to cope. I volunteered to host gatherings at home, which gave me the excuse *I'm-too-busy-to-talk*. In other settings, I found distractions: the children, magazines, alcohol. Depression is a study in paradox. I begged Chris not to leave me while I pushed him out the door; I ignored the phone calls and messages from my friends, then felt abandoned; I isolated myself and was devastated by my isolation. I *knew* I needed professional, medical help, but I didn't have the ability to make a simple phone call.

A year after giving birth, I weaned the boys and regained status as sole occupier of my body. I began to entertain the idea of medication, but was hesitant because of the side effects. I have always wanted to find the root of an ailment instead of masking symptoms with medication and am sensitive to any kind of drug. It's a misconception that antidepressants are an easy fix; they require a daily commitment and can take weeks to work. Until one builds tolerance, there are also physical side effects, such as nausea, headaches, and "brain zaps," a sudden dizziness and sensation of electrical waves in the brain.

Because making even the smallest decisions exhausted me, I delayed making the bigger decision to try medication. Days went by when, with Chris safely gone to work, I would collapse on the floor, next to the twins and wail along with them—all of us crying to be taken care of. I called Chris at work, only to sob on the phone and hang up. For months, I told myself that Taj and Luke were too young to be considered witnesses to my breakdowns. As long as I held them, fed them organic homemade baby food, and hung black-and-white geometric-shaped mobiles for them to stare at, they wouldn't notice that I wasn't in the right life. But one day in particular, I could tell the boys knew something wasn't right. Something happened that was different from the day before. In the midst of our usual morning meltdown, one of them—maybe both—looked at me for the briefest moment and seemed to recognize the dark cloud that covered everything we did. That's when I knew I could not let my children have a mother like this.

## vii.

My first step was buying a book: *Understanding Depression: What We Know and What You Can Do About It*. Around that time, for one of the first times in my life, I had health insurance. I made an appointment with a psychologist listed in our insurance network and she referred me to a family doctor. I could barely speak through the appointment because I was crying so hard. At the recommendation of the psychologist, I asked the doctor for a popular anti-depressant, Lexapro. He wasn't quick to fill out a prescription without knowing more specifics about my symptoms, something that irritated me because of my desperation. *He wants to know details?* He explained that differences in sleep, anxiety, and appetite can tell him more about which neurotransmitters I might not be getting enough of. I had heard of serotonin, but learned

about more neurotransmitters—norepinephrine and dopamine—and which medications inhibit the natural reuptake process that occurs in our bodies, enabling these chemicals to accumulate. This information, something scientific and tangible, seemed to be what I needed to feel absolutely sure about three things, for the first time in my life: 1) Depression is real. 2) I have it. 3) I can do something to make it better.

The doctor prescribed the maximum dose of an anti-anxiety, anti-depressant that inhibits the reuptake of both serotonin and norepinephrine, and I swear I could feel it working in the first 72 hours, despite his insistence that it would take weeks. Chris arranged to have help with the twins the weekend I began the medication. I experienced every physical possible side effect, especially nausea, but none of the physical discomfort was as horrifying as the madness had become. I've heard anti-depressants criticized for making people “not themselves,” that they work only because they shut down a person's true thoughts and feelings. But in my experience, when the anti-depressant was clearly working, I had never felt more like myself. I felt like the person I was meant to be all along had been smothered by negative thoughts and emotions all those years and she was finally able to feel the sun on her skin and breathe fresh air. I couldn't believe how much more vibrant and focused the world looked. I was sorry for the girl I had been before, when I looked at the Beck Depression Inventory and remembered my previous acceptance that the thought *I feel that the future is hopeless and things cannot improve* is normal.

Our insurance covered little of the psychotherapy I needed, so I tried to get by with as few visits possible. When we could afford it, I met with a Prius-driving, Birkenstock-wearing therapist to talk about my childhood and “current state of

mourning,” as she described my reaction to the unplanned pregnancy and new responsibilities. I took omega-3’s and B-6’s, exercised, and put ridiculous amounts of effort into remembering to relax and eat regularly. I wanted the anti-depressants to be a short-term tool. I wanted to learn preventative and holistic ways to handle depression, who, in the way of a dedicated friend, will probably be with me my entire life. The clearer my mind became, the more I wanted to understand why I felt so dissatisfied with this new transition in my life: motherhood. While all of my attempts at recovery were guiding me to a better place, it wasn’t until I began reading about the experiences of other mothers and writing about my own that I began to feel fully alive.

### viii.

As Daphne de Marneffe writes in *Maternal Desire*, “It would seem that everything it is possible to say about motherhood in America has already been said.” Considering the insightfulness of her own book, she may just be right. However, all of us want to contribute to the conversation. One of the compelling characteristics of an essay is the dialogue with the writing that precedes it. I use other texts in several ways: to provoke my own ideas, back up claims, or for new perspectives in debate. Because the essayist must have the knowledge of a rambler, as Lydia Fakundiny explains, “There’s no mistaking it: essayists read, avidly and widely.”

In the tenth anniversary introduction to *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich writes that in 1972, “there was virtually nothing being written on motherhood as an issue.” But despite Rich’s breaking ground for future generations, twenty years later, when Melissa West researched the experience of motherhood, she found “Nothing. Silence.” Debra

Adelaide, another author of maternal narratives in the late 1990s, said the reaction she got from publishers: “Don’t write about this. It’s self-indulgent. Boring. Of limited interest.”

But since the turn of the century, in the middle of my own personal crisis, an outpouring of autobiographical books on motherhood have been published, with more coming out each year. With the explosion of writing on motherhood in the last decade, the types of writing alone are impressive and provide for vivid conversation. As many as there are, no one seems to know what to do with them. At the bookstore, will they be shelved under “Parenting,” “Memoir,” “Women’s Studies,” or “Cultural Criticism”? Should they be published in such traditional literary heavyweights as *The Atlantic*, or are they more appropriate for *Parent and Child*? How can *It Sucked and Then I Cried*, a compilation of entries from pop-culture blog dooce.com, be included in the same reading list on Amazon as, what most writers describe, a “landmark” book, *Of Woman Born*?

It’s this last book that has most changed my understanding of motherhood. Many of the authors to follow Rich have acknowledged the brutal honesty and sincere compassion with which she relates her story. Rich defined for me the “unexamined assumptions” of motherhood I held, and I’m indebted to her for teaching me the difference between motherhood as experience and as institution. In *The Myths of Motherhood*, Shari Thurer describes the institution of motherhood and our understanding of “the good mother,” as being culturally derived and in fluctuation based on social mythology. “As with most myths,” she writes, “the current Western version is so pervasive that, like air, it is unnoticeable.”

Despite the progression in our cultural understanding, however, in my own experience not much has changed between the learned institution of motherhood and the

guilt, anger, and fear it provokes, and the actual experience, with the love, elation, and metamorphosis it brings. In a search to distinguish incongruencies between the two, I've become a detective of my experience. Whenever feelings of doubt, inadequacy, or guilt consume me, I ask myself: *Are you doing this because it's best for you and your children? Or because you feel obligated?* It's my desire for authenticity that's caused me to question everything I can about the way things are "supposed" to be. Some readers may be turned off by my irreverence toward the usual traditions: baby books, baby showers, and inherited religion are all up for scrutiny in this collection. But I have found sacredness in some of the seemingly irrelevant aspects of parenting.

#### ix.

Over a century ago, the first psychoanalyst to specialize in women, Helene Deutsch, declared, "Mothers don't write, they are written." Despite this "glaring need to restore to mother her own presence," as Shari Thurer puts it, there still exists criticism of the privilege involved in writing about motherhood. In *Mother Shock*, Andrea Buchanan acknowledges, "It is problematic to discuss the difficulties of mothering without seeming ungrateful, uncaring, unappreciative, or unbalanced." I'm sensitive to the criticism that non-fiction writers, whether they write autobiographies or blogs, take their privileges for granted. But Adrienne Rich describes the paradox involved in her experience of motherhood: "although different from many other women's experiences it was not unique; and that only in shedding the illusion of my uniqueness could I hope, as a woman, to have any authentic life at all."

The only experience I can share is the one I know: I've been lucky to have an involved partner, supportive family, resources, and opportunities to indulge in creativity.

It's difficult to navigate the middle ground between searching for what one wants and having what one needs in order to write about the search. If no mother had an opportunity for her voice and story to be heard, might motherhood be "kept carefully shrouded in silence, disinformation, and outright lies," as Susan Maushart suggests in *The Mask of Motherhood?*

Regardless of our circumstances, we want to share stories "in much the same spirit," Gloria Steinem said, "that explorers share maps, hoping to speed each other's journey, but knowing that journey we make will be our own." If our stories are maps, then I want explore the ambiguous places that haven't received much coverage on the topic of motherhood. I don't weigh in on the prevalent surface debates regarding parenting, especially when the relevance of such debates diminishes over time: Schedule or demand? Breast or bottle? Work or stay-at-home? From my experience, and that of many women, those issues are rarely as bifurcated anyway. Susan Cheever, a contributor to *Child of Mine*, remarked, "If there is a secret to my writing, it is that I don't care about answers." I'm most confident with this approach. The day I claim to have definite conclusions or absolutes is the day I hope I stop writing.

Rather than exploring the typically polarizing issues that surface in discussions of parenting, I find more meaning in the smaller details. In the spirit of the personal essay, this collection provides a point of intersection for many different things; it reflects a style embraced by feminist writers like Adrienne Rich who describes *Of Woman Born* as an "odd-fangled approach: personal testimony mingled with research, and theory which derived from both." While the following essays find their inspiration in my experiences as a mother, it's the desire to understand how these experiences connect with others that

drives research and theory. As a conduit with which to connect my personal experience to a more universal understanding, I often turn to anatomy, which is why each section is organized by a part of the body: both literally and symbolically.

The “in-between-ness” with regard to creative writing and research, literature and theory, process and product, is an exhilarating place. In fact, it feels similar to a place in which I exist right now: a few of the questions that used to torment me (Will I marry? Will I have kids? What will I do?) have been answered. Far from making me feel settled, these changes have revealed to me that I’m not on a journey to “find myself,” as I used to believe. It’s more about inventing myself. The essay is a piece of writing that embodies this very concept. Describing Montaigne’s style as an essayist, Douglas Atkins writes, “You sense him reflecting, turning ideas over in his mind, pursuing a thought here, caressing it there, assaying as he tries it on—thinking *in the process* of writing.” This process is the same one that is *life*. The more I experience, the more I realize how little I understand: that the judgments I made when I was younger were too hasty. I’m working now to exist in the process of life, not aiming towards what I used to perceive as a final, polished piece of work. Writing essays gives me a chance to be who I would like to be all the time.

The question of who I would *like* to be brings up another point: the question of accuracy in non-fiction. Sometimes two people who experience the same event will argue over the most mundane details: *The bag was blue! No, it was red!* If a simple recollection of such events is subjective, then agreeing on one interpretation of the same events seems impossible. In the process of writing non-fiction, I can’t help but share a few anecdotes that include the people who shape my life, whether they are friends or strangers.

However, as much as possible, I want to avoid telling too much of someone else's story. Non-fiction writers have a variety of opinions on this matter. In the dedication to *Home Game* Michael Lewis writes to his children, "If you don't want to see it in print, don't do it." While this warning appears safe and fair enough, I'm more sympathetic to the consideration Adrienne Rich offers when writing about her mother: "Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story other landscapes would be revealed."

**x.**

When the twins were 18 months old, I began taking an antidepressant and stayed on it for two years. While in recovery, when my mind was strong enough, I had regular cognitive therapy, made changes in my diet, learned the practice of meditation, and continued to exercise. After two years without depression, I stopped taking medication to become pregnant with a third child, my daughter, Sola. Other than some intense anxiety and insomnia during pregnancy, I didn't experience "the crushing" until over a year after giving birth to Sola, rounding two years without medication.

On the brink of finishing this collection, I was hit again, this time harder and faster than ever before. The authors of *The Mindful Way Through Depression* explain that the likelihood that a person will experience another episode increases by 16% after every episode. Their overlying theory is that our bodies maintain a memory that includes connection between four elements: feelings, thoughts, physical sensations, and behavior. Every time a person gets depressed, the connection among these elements gets stronger, until the disruption of even one triggers a response from the rest.

At the same time Chris and I were planning to move our family across the county for his job, I was running into obstacles with both teaching and writing. After struggling to sleep several nights because of heightened stress, I managed to get a few hours. When I woke, a familiar clouding was settled in my mind. It seemed that overnight I went from feeling typical stress to not being able to function at all. The smallest decisions—should I get up? should I have something to eat?—paralyzed me. I couldn't stop crying, couldn't sleep, and cancelled the classes I teach. Chris took off work and became a single parent, with one more person who needed care.

With some experience behind us, we knew to call for help sooner this time, and made an appointment with my therapist. I didn't want to rush into taking antidepressants again because of the commitment and physical adjustments. For two weeks after this latest "crushing," hit, I only focused on getting better. I attempted recovery through diet and exercise. I sat in the sun. I ate organic foods high in nutrients, gave up coffee and alcohol, and went for long runs and bike rides. We postponed our impending move. But my anxiety and adrenaline were so high, I sometimes went 48 hours without sleep. When I began to feel too exhausted to leave my room but still couldn't have even an hour break from the cacophony in my mind through sleep, my thoughts turned a welcome glance towards death, and I made the phone call. I needed to start antidepressants again.

It's never *one thing* that pushes depression into complete debilitation. Even when I'm well, I can't seem to shake old habits. One in particular is my ability to take the best moments I experience and immediately react to my good-fortune with unfocused guilt. When I taste a delicious food, my mind goes to obscure figures who don't have enough. When I laugh with my children, my mind goes to hypothetical parents who have lost their

own. I'm working now consciously to change my guilt for what others don't have into feelings of gratitude for what I do. As much as I try, I'm not sure I'll ever be completely free of my tendencies towards compulsion, obsession, and an overall "busyness" that is the source of both fullness and anxiety; all of these things contribute to a deeply rich existence. I'm an intense person to be around, especially during recovery from "the crushing." After coming out of such horrible places in my mind, I have little patience for small talk and quickly judge people who strike me as insincere.

I'm not sure how those closest to me put up with my quirks, but their unwavering support builds my confidence. In his memoir on depression, *Darkness Visible*, William Styron articulates a role others can play when they care for someone who suffers what he refers to as "a siege." People who have recovered from the disease, he writes, "bear witness to what is probably its only saving grace: it is conquerable." Styron says the fact of possible recovery should serve as encouragement, and "if the encouragement is dogged enough—and the support equally committed and passionate—the endangered one can nearly always be saved."

My most recent experience with "the crushing," which hit faster and harder than ever before, was endurable for one clear reason: the support I had from my family and friends. For a low-level depression, the typical, good-intentioned responses might seem reasonable: *Are you taking your vitamins? Can you get yourself to the gym? I'll pray for you!* But when one is physically and mentally incapacitated, these responses become meaningless platitudes. When I needed it, the people who cared for me sprang into action. My husband made the phone calls that I couldn't, my mom cared for the children, and my friends went grocery shopping and brought over food. One of my best friends

wouldn't *let* me avoid her; after I ignored her calls and messages, she went through Chris to see what she could do.

It's this kind of assurance that people aren't giving up on me, despite my belief that they should, that provides the smallest relief that I might be OK. That the thoughts consuming my mind—*I'm a failure, I'm a terrible person, It would be better for everyone if I just died*—might not be as real as they seem.

**xi.**

Despite how immensely alone I've sometimes felt in the past five years, it turns out I have company. At the time of this writing, the rate of unplanned pregnancies in the United States is at least 49%; the rate of twin births has increased by 70% since 1980, and one in eight women will experience a depressive disorder at least once in her lifetime. But even knowing these statistics, the words of Christopher Hitchens writes ring true: "One almost develops a kind of elitism about the uniqueness of one's own personal disorder." It's reading about the experiences of others that helps us, as Rich said, "shed the illusion of uniqueness."

In the same way that motherhood and depression have been lessons in paradox, writing this introduction proves to be another. The introduction to a body of work is the last thing a writer composes and the first thing readers read. If only motherhood and recovery from depression worked this way. If only we could go back to write the overview of what's to come.

For example, five years ago, when I was crumpled on the floor next to my one-year-old twin sons, sure that I'd lost myself and my life, I wish I could have seen who we'd become together. I sorely missed the bonding experience with my sons in their first

year that I had later with their sister. I can point fingers and make excuses— the “unplanned” part of the pregnancy, the depression, the institution of motherhood—but none of those reasons give me another chance. I’m okay with this realization, though. Not only because I *have* to be, but also because I feel connected to Taj and Luke in a way that transcends the notion of “bonding.” I feel like we are survivors together—that we’ve struggled through some kind of natural disaster—and we’ve emerged, not only intact, but also grateful for one another in a way only survivors can be.

Luke and Taj gave me a reason to discover that a life of chronic aching, nights of insomnia, and days spent weeping does not have to be normal. They’ve helped me find purpose, but I don’t mean that in the clichéd way women say, “my purpose is to be a mother.” They’ve helped me find purpose as an artist, attempting to render the ordinary extraordinary. Proust said, “We are healed from suffering only by experiencing it to the full.” Thanks to the brave women who have told their stories before me, I can admit motherhood causes me suffering--“the exquisite suffering of ambivalence”--Adrienne Rich writes in “Anger and Tenderness.” Mothers no longer have to fear this acknowledgment implies that we don’t love our children, “but it’s in the enormity and inevitability of this love” Rich writes, “that the sufferings lie.” Writing about the complexities of motherhood has not only helped me experience this suffering to the full, but also helped me heal. The origins for the following essays were found in the sharp edges I stumble across on the banks of motherhood: rocks I pick up, examine, and hope to smooth into form.

**i. hippocampus**

**cerebral** \sə-rē-brəl, ser-ə-, se-rə-\ *adj.* of or relating to the brain or the intellect

## Whose Life Is It, Anyway?

*Remember that life you thought you had?*

*Guess what. It's not yours anymore.*

--anonymous, as told to Michael Lewis

I'm doing what I said I wouldn't do. I said it was cheesy and sentimental. My girlfriends would tell me they were doing it and I would excuse myself, go to the restroom, and roll my eyes.

I'm keeping a journal for my kids.

It started when my sister-in-law, an artist who seems to be surrounded at all times by blooming flowers and yellow butterflies, sent my newborn daughter a golden-tan leather notebook. It was the kind I'd like to steal for myself, but couldn't, as it had Sola's name on it in paint I couldn't remove. It was accompanied by a note in that artist-y handwriting:

"We have a journal for each of our kids," Evelien had written. "I plan to write in them on every birthday..."

*Give me a break*, I thought. More eye-rolling.

"...but I'm a few years behind."

*A few years behind?* She has three kids: the oldest is five, the youngest is one. It's a little soon to be behind. This is not a judgment so much as a reason for me to feel better about my own journal-keeping inadequacies.

It's not that I have something against journal-keeping. On the contrary, I have been journaling since junior high. For Christmas my eighth-grade year, I received a small notebook with Garfield on the peach plastic cover. It was the kind that came with a key and a cheap, gold lock. I promptly lost the key and broke the lock, and I wrote in pencil,

so the pages are now smudged and faded, but once I filled it I immediately bought another and have gone through at least a dozen since.

I'm self-conscious about my journal-keeping. I imagine that other people who keep journals must write brilliant, insightful things on a daily basis, with a chance to be published after they die. I have a friend who transforms each event in her life into a tangible work of art. She arranges random, scrappy mementos—ticket stubs, receipts, photos, dried lavender, lists—in a haphazard-but-aesthetically-pleasing sort of way, and accompanies them with colorful notes that fill in the details. Another friend uses all of the literary techniques learned through her creative-writing degree—sensory details, metaphor, symbolism—as if she is writing for an audience. David Sedaris has figured out how to make a living through his diary: I have dressed up and paid good money to join a sold-out crowd listen to him read about waiting in a security line at the airport.

I do none of these things in my journals. My guess is that people would rather read *Moby Dick* twice than go through my stuff. I record neither deep secrets nor deep insights, and certainly don't entertain. And my handwriting is atrocious. No, I mostly just record the facts of what happened. My journals are a way to supplement my poor memory (which is not improving, despite a large consumption of fish oil capsules) and slow time down—make the moments last—as it always seems I am sitting in the backseat of a speeding car, looking out the rearview window at my life, which lingers behind lazily in the sun. It usually feels as though I don't understand what it is I've just done until I look back and write it down, bit by bit, in chronological order.

Not only does keeping a journal of mundane details for three other people sound time-consuming, but it also sounds boring. It makes me think of my reaction when

friends send detailed messages about each stage their newborns are passing through—*Her poo is more solid now, without the flecks of green mucus!* or *We made the switch from carrots to peas today!* (One day my reply to these messages will be, *Hey, can you just let me know if something is dramatically abnormal? Like, if he is aging in reverse or working on a cure for cancer? Otherwise, I can just guesstimate his age in months and Google “normal childhood development.”*)

I do not want to keep boring journals for my children. All those benchmarks in the early years don't really matter to anyone but parents and grandparents, and even then, they don't seem to matter for very long. The day Luke took his first step, I promptly retrieved the “First Years” calendar I received at my baby shower and placed the appropriate sticker on the date thinking, *like I'm ever going to forget such a monumental event.* But considering his twin brother, Taj, and then baby sister, Sola, have their own calendars, I'm getting swamped in these damn stickers and have lowered the bar to just remembering birthdays. (Much more manageable, considering the twins share the same day.) Besides, my own mother never kept such records for me, and I don't feel robbed or damaged because I don't know when I started to walk; all I know is that I walk fine now. Each milestone in these early years seems much more triumphant for the parents than the child anyway, as exhibited the other day when Sola stood for the first time, quietly looked at her feet, and then promptly fell over due to the confusion caused by Chris and me jumping and yelling and running to get the camcorder.

This *new* benchmark moment I've imagined—The Handing Down of the Journal—sounds much more consequential. If I'm going to do it, I want to do it right. A strategy for sprucing up the facts and milestones might be to add more personal reflection

or humor, but I'm wary of this approach as well. I've read journals and letters written from parents to children that seem intended for everyone but the child. Heather Armstrong published the collection of letters she wrote her daughter's first year in *It Sucked and Then I Cried* and, while often funny and entertaining, they rarely strike me as sincere. "The past few weeks have seemed like a hazy acid trip," she writes. "Not that we would know what an acid trip feels like because we would never drop acid, no not ever. Drugs are bad and you should say no to drugs, but Advil is totally okay, and can I tell you how happy I am that I get to take Advil again?"

Witty, yes, but if I'm going to write to my children, I'm not intending for the results to make it to the best-seller list. So it was with skepticism and hesitance that I began to write what I think of as "notes" to my daughter. Once I got started, I actually enjoyed it. I went out and bought two more journals, one for each of my twin sons. Rather than sticking to the birthday deadline, I write in them whenever the mood strikes, with the hope that it strikes at least a couple times a year. An entry might be inspired by a developmental milestone or seasonal change, but more likely the catalyst is something as simple as the way my daughter was looking out the window. I record interesting or funny things the boys say, keep track of their evolving hobbies and interests, and offer my (admittedly questionable) insight into who I think they are, why they make the bizarre choices that they do. Sometimes I'll catch myself defending the bizarre choices *I* make, and this is when I worry that I'm using their journals for my own therapy sessions. When I get too reflective, I have to remind myself that this journal-keeping is for them, not me.

But after one particular journal session, I looked back at what I had written and wondered who I was really writing for. *Who is your audience?* I always ask my freshman

writing students. I realized I use the journals to address my kids as adults, as equals with whom I'd like to have a conversation that doesn't include Thomas train characters or descriptions of various bodily functions. And because I don't know *who* my children will be as adults, because, to some extent, I'm manipulating them into imagined future-people who don't really exist, I'm beginning to wonder if I'm really just keeping this journal for myself, after all. It's like I'm trying to create an alternative universe, possible only through time-travel or journal-keeping, in which I can be the same age as my children. If I can't know them when we are all five years old together, I will try to know them when we are all thirty.

I am also serving as experience-keeper for them, recording their early lives, creating memories that they don't have the capacity yet to keep for themselves. But every memory is subjective: I interpret their actions and words into some sort of meaning that might be very different from one they would make for themselves. It's because of this subjectivity that I'm beginning to feel like the lives my children are living are also my own. This disorientation caused by my record-keeping is one of several I've experienced since having kids that makes me ask, *whose life is this?* It seems our lives, like our limbs when we cuddle at night, are all tangled up.

I picture life with young children as a Venn diagram, the illustration used in logistics to show possible relationships among finite sets. Each of us is a circle, related to one another on a plane. To a fundamental extent, our lives are our own, like the parts of the circles not intersecting with any other part. But, especially in the children's early years, the majority of the circles' surfaces overlap, creating an existence where one life is

inextricable from the other. I suppose it's only fair that I get to live so much of their lives for them now, as it seems they have almost entirely taken over mine.

I distinctly remember the first time I realized my life didn't belong to me, in the way that it had before I had children. To celebrate the arrival of the twins, my extended family held a pot-luck dinner. Everyone was excited to see the newborns and pass them around, and I was feeling like a rockstar. Until the food was ready. My babies were promptly returned, and I looked on longingly as people filled their own plates with the use of their own two free hands. After I nursed the twins, changed their diapers, and rocked them to sleep, the little bit of food that was left was cold.

Even when I do get an hour or two of life that is supposed to be my own and I get in a car or ride my bike without having to strap anyone in behind me, I go to the grocery store or salon with an undercurrent of resentment that 1) someone is waiting for me to come back and 2) I can't stop thinking about the very creatures I so desperately need a break from. Are they safe? Are they laughing? Do they know how much they're loved?

When I say my life is not my own, I understand no one really "owns" life, in the literal sense of the verb, "to possess," but a close look at the language we use when describing our relationship to others points to our possessive inclination. Of course, I use the possessive pronoun "my" when I describe the relationship between me and these three small beings in my care, my children, just as each calls me "my" mother. But as Kahlil Gibran has said, "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They came through you but not from you and though they are with you yet they belong not to you."

I find Gibran’s words reassuring; this philosophy relieves some of the pressure caused by an overwhelming sense of responsibility a parent feels. Indeed, Gibran’s words remind me of something a friend’s mother said when I was in my early twenties. I had commented to my friend and her mom that they seemed to have one of the best mother-daughter relationships I’d ever seen; they were extremely close and honest with one another, yet didn’t have the underlying tension and baggage that often accompanies such a relationship. In fact, the mother had three daughters and a similar relationship with each. When I asked her what she thought made the difference, she said she has never considered any of her children her own, which makes a fundamental distinction in the relationship. “Even when they were little,” she said, “I just saw them as autonomous beings, the same as me, who happened to be temporarily placed in my care.”

Her words remain with me now, over a decade later, as I struggle to guide my children without the default reflex that they are “mine.” (*Because I’m your mother, that’s why!* I’ve said and cringe at how ridiculous it sounds.) Even though these children are not mine, they are so young and, to be frank, clueless: they don’t seem to be their own yet, either. I don’t feel like I “own” them outright, in the sense that the word implies, but keeping their journals—tracking their progress, reflecting on their behavior, creating their memories—makes me feel like I’m living their existence right now even more than they are.

As is often the case when I search around to determine where on the spectrum of “normal” I belong, I have discovered I’m not the only parent to be confused by this merging of identities. In his essay “Once More to the Lake,” E.B. White writes of a time

he returned to Maine with his son to visit a place he frequented as a boy. Because the years had passed and the lake remained for the most part unchanged, the transformation of himself from son to father became overwhelming. He writes of a morning spent fishing with his son. “I looked at the boy, who was silently watching his fly, and it was my hands that held his rod, my eyes watching. I felt dizzy and didn’t know which rod I was at the end of. Everywhere we went I had trouble making out which was I, the one walking at my side, the one walking in my pants.”

My own sister had a similar experience, though hers occurred shortly after giving birth. Within 24 hours of having her son, she woke up in panicked confusion, feeling as though it was *she* who had just been born. Looking into the bassinet didn’t help: “I couldn’t tell if I was him and he was me or if I was me and he was him,” she says. She had never heard of anyone else having this experience and wrote it off as postpartum hormones playing tricks, until the same thing happened after giving birth to her daughter. Again, during the day this time, she felt the same confusion.

These examples of identity confusion focus on physiological sensations; I’m particularly interested in the role memory plays in shaping identity—in answering the question *whose life is this?* Is our ability to store long-term memories connected with autonomy? In a book about life-writing, Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola ask the reader to recall her earliest memory. “What is the memory that always emerges from the dim reaches of your consciousness as the *first one*, the beginning to this life you call your own?”

I wonder how this passage relates to my search for the beginning of a long untangling I will make with my children. As the twins turn five, the average age most of

us are when we begin to retain the dream-like scenes and feelings in our minds that constitute our first memories, I wonder if it's time for me to stop considering myself an objective memory-keeper for them and face that their lives are becoming more their own, that my version of things is slowly giving way to theirs.

Memory certainly plays a crucial role in shaping our search for meaning and forming our life-narratives. I employ all kinds of tools to keep memories from fading: the journals, photographs, video cameras. I am often guilty of not being “in the moment” until the moment is officially over and I'm stuck back in time scrolling through still frames on my digital camera while the next moment is happening—there's a reason it's called a *memory card*. It's almost as if what defines “the moments” that make up my life is my ability to capture them, like butterflies in a net, to prove they exist.

Perhaps this is because my memory is so bad in the first place. I am often embarrassed when my family members or childhood friends—even recently found friends—begin to reminisce. “Do you remember...?” they ask. And I never do. If I am able to squeak out a memory, it's usually of harm done or ill feelings had, which makes sense, as emotions play an essential role in forming memories. It's natural for us to have a clearer picture in our minds when there is a strong emotion tied to an event. As one who has struggled with depression since adolescence, I was intrigued with Daniel Pendick's article in “Memory Loss and the Brain,” in which he discusses a well-known symptom of depression: memory impairment. He attributes a lack of attention and concentration to the inability to create long-term memories. More searching into this subject led me to a miniscule part of the limbic system that, paradoxically, plays a huge role in memory: the hippocampus.

I have no idea how big my particular hippocampus is, but I'm starting to wonder. I know what it might look like, thanks to the Greeks, those articulate devils with their descriptive language. *Hippos* is Greek for horse, and *kampos* is a sea monster. These two words fit together nicely to describe a small marine species: the seahorse. When neuroanatomists discovered the horseshoe-shaped structure in the temporal lobe of the brain, naming it "hippocampus" must have seemed more scientifically appropriate than the juvenile "seahorse," especially considering the plural form of the word, *hippocampi*; after all, there are actually two, one on each side. "Seahorsies" just wouldn't hold the same professional weight.

I stumbled on this somewhat clumsy, yet academic-sounding word in an article on anxiety disorders. Naturally, I was intrigued. As is my habit of doing self-diagnoses via the Internet, I read *hippocampus* and had the distinct feeling that, although I had never known I had one before, I suddenly *just knew* there was something wrong with mine.

Once I had the word on my tongue, I wanted to taste more. What is it? What does it do? Could mine be damaged? Further investigation revealed that the hippocampus has important functions related to mood and memory. The decrease in volume of the hippocampus, or hippocampal atrophy, is a natural occurrence of age, but scientists have recently discovered a more extreme atrophy in patients with Alzheimer's dementia, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression. One of the many mysteries surrounding the relationship between the brain and depression concerns the hippocampus. The reason for hippocampal atrophy seems apparent: studies suggest that stress and the accompanying hormones it releases inhibit the growth of cells in the hippocampus. But while there is substantial evidence of the connection between the hippocampus and major depression

(which many scientists say is, ultimately, a stress-related disorder), the cause-and-effect relationship is still not clear. Does depression cause hippocampal atrophy, or does the seahorse shrinkage come first?

I don't know the answer to that question right now, but I am fairly certain my hippocampus isn't getting any *bigger* and my memory isn't getting any *better*. So, for now, I'll have to trudge ahead with the role as memory-keeper for my children, questionable as my qualifications for this role may seem.

In an attempt to make sense of, and come to terms with, the role memory plays in an emerging identity, I look at photos of myself as a young child, trying to pinpoint when I consciously came into being. The photos look like artifacts from another world, taken on a different kind of camera with a different mother's eye. I look at (who I have to remind myself is) me, though I don't remember being her. When I see the young girl in the photos—holding her baby sister, lined up at the sprinkler with the neighbor kids, sitting on her dad's motorcycle—I don't recognize the life she was living; it doesn't feel like mine. I suppose what I'm looking at is my own mother, Nedra's life, more than my own and remember E.B. White's rumination at the lake due to the merging existence with his son: "I began to sustain the illusion that he was I, and therefore, by simple transposition, that I was my father."

Recently, at a family gathering, I saw my mother's brother for the first time in years. "Hello, Nedra-thirty-years-ago," he said. He's one of many who marvel at our close resemblance. I experiment, when I run after the boys or change the baby's diaper, try to channel the mother she must have been, but it feels awkward and forced. I know

who my mother is *now*, but I don't who she *was*. I remember long braided hair, thick library books at night, lots of tomatoes in the summer. Do these things make up a mother's life?

My mother's five children are grown, something I assumed would free her, make her feel as though her life is her own again, but with nine grandchildren, her Venn Diagram is more crowded than ever. She lives nearby, and helps us with the kids on a regular basis.

Chris and I returned from a movie one night to find the house in its usual state of chaos. A sandal was floating in the toilet, mashed potatoes were crusted onto the dog's head, and the twins ran by in a blur, wearing nothing but socks and capes.

"I don't know how you parents do it," Mom said. "At least I get to go home now."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" I asked. "You did it with five."

I brought her the old photos of myself I had been pouring over recently, eager to hear what she had to say. She studied them and murmured, "I guess you have to be young. That seems like such a long time ago; I barely remember."

She said it feels now like that must have been someone else's life.

## Winging It

*As mothers we should give ourselves the room, the dignity,  
to discover what we think and what we want.*

--Daphne de Marneffe

I can describe, to anyone who asks, the exact smell of every airport in the country. If you like ice cream, arrange for a connecting flight through Memphis. The superlative blend of vanilla, sugar, and cream from three Baskin Robbins fills the air. The walls of Logan International, in Boston, have been so heavily perfumed with coffee from Dunkin Donuts that, upon a red-eye arrival, the scent alone is enough to transform the sunrise above the harbor, where the airport sits, into an awe-inspiring, pink and orange message: *You were meant to see this*, it whispers. The airport I love to hate, Metro Wayne County in Detroit, I used to call “De-Toilet,” for odors I won’t inventory here. I’ve heard that renovations have been made since the old days and now it competes with Minneapolis and Denver. But until I return to De-Toilet to confirm the rumors, I can only rely on memory.

I was a flight attendant ten years ago, a brief stint between colleges and boyfriends and the elusive quest to “find myself” (which I’m pretty sure I did not do). It was the perfect job for an uncommitted, meandering twenty-year-old. I rarely slept in the same bed two nights in a row, I had no regular, demanding relationships to maintain, and if I didn’t like the identity I had established for myself one day, I could easily modify it the next, as I never worked with the same crew twice. I changed everything about myself on a regular basis, from my hairstyle to my religion. When my car’s air conditioner broke the summer I was based in Memphis and I showed up for work looking like a swamp creature, I requested a transfer to Boston and moved the next month—everything I owned

fit in my Toyota Corolla, so one morning I packed up the air mattress, left a note for the girls with whom I shared a crash-pad, and drove northeast for a more temperate July.

Of course, the perks of this lifestyle came with drawbacks, which is why it lasted only two years. I was often anxious and depressed—spent a lot of time crying in those tiny DC-9 lavatories—and as much as I got to travel, I never felt drawn to any place in particular, which made establishing a home base impossible. I was Contradiction Embodied: I wanted to be single, but I hated feeling lonely. I wanted to be a world-traveler, but I missed the Midwest. I wanted to be independent, but I also wanted my mom. Insecurity and uncertainty felt like extra weights in my carry-on. After one last hurrah to Amsterdam in December of my second year, I resigned. I couldn't stand the thought of spending another Christmas by myself in a hotel room, eating Chinese takeout, phoning my family to hear a familiar voice.

I don't remember a time when I didn't have the disconcerting feeling that *I just don't know what I want*. In fourth grade, I lost sleep over invitations to join my classmates' exclusive, self-governed clubs: the Pink Flamingos, or their rival, the Blue Dolphins. In junior high, I couldn't understand how I loved my best friend so much, yet still had such an enormous crush on her boyfriend. In high school, I wondered how I could feel as equally at home in the church youth group, during prayer, as I did at a house-party, drunk out of my mind. Regardless of my age or circumstance, the angst I feel when presented with choices is just as intense and genuine as it has been any time, refusing me the ability to trivialize those past dilemmas as inconsequential or trite. I seemed to emerge from the womb wondering, *Am I making the right choice?*

During my senior year of high school, our sociology teacher told the class to write a letter to ourselves, from ten years in the future. The twenty-seven-year-old Maria would write the seventeen-year-old Maria and tell her about her life. “Save that letter,” he said, “and in ten years you won’t believe how you’ve changed.” I saved my letter and, in a lot of ways, I can’t believe how I *haven’t* changed. “Dear Maria,” it began. “It’s ten years from now and you still don’t know what you want to do.”

My letter predicted that in a decade, I was just as likely to be barefoot and pregnant in South Carolina as I did to be single and famous in Hollywood. While I’m closer to the former, in flip-flops and pregnant with my third child in Kansas, I still feel a rush when I summon Henry David Thoreau’s declaration: *The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation*. As a freshman in college, I believed I had found a soul-mate in Thoreau. I recognize the critique that his search for authenticity was, in itself, inauthentic. I’ve been to Walden Pond; I know he wasn’t as far removed from civilization as many believe and that a life in which fundamental needs are met—for food, shelter, and health—is a luxury not available to everyone. It’s a privilege to be able to ruminate over existential quandaries. But Thoreau’s desire to “live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life,” appeals to a restlessness I sense in my own longings: perhaps the choices that present themselves are just distractions from a deeper sort of existence.

After my short-lived career with the airlines, with the help of government loans and grants, I decided to give college another go. By the time I graduated, I had switched universities three times and didn’t declare a major until my last semester. I had enjoyed taking whatever courses interested me by inventing an advisor and forging his signature

on my enrollment forms. When I figured I had enough credit for a degree in *something*, a real advisor looked at my transcript and announced, “You’re a creative writer.” I got my degree in English, unsure quite how, or why.

When I met Chris, who would become my husband, we were both recent college graduates living in our Kansas university town. One of the many things contributing to our chemistry was the mutual desire to explore: new places, ideas, hobbies, and interests. When Chris explained to me that he had quit his corporate job the previous year in order to ride his bicycle halfway across the country on a self-supported tour, I knew I was in love. One of our first nights together, we spread my torn-up road atlas across the bed and scoured it for hours. We pointed out the places we’d been and the places we wanted to go. I showed him where I wanted to live on the coast in Mexico and we sketched out a vague plan to make it happen. After a while there, we would settle in his dream local: a place with mountains and a river. Utah, or maybe Colorado. Oregon or New Hampshire would do. While we never came up with anything too concrete or committed, the point was that we had places to go, things to do, people to meet.

We were saving up to buy matching kayaks a few months after we met when I got pregnant. It must have been the spontaneous nature of our relationship combined with utter naïveté that caused us to be so excited without any questions as to how a completely dependant human being in our permanent care might alter our lifestyle. At first, the pregnancy felt like another adventure—something that just “happened” to us. The news that I was carrying twins heightened the drama and excitement: “If we’re going to do this, let’s *do this*.”

Neither of us knew if we wanted to stay in town, where we had family close by, or to continue with our plans for a Mexican adventure. We weren't sure how we would earn money for increased expenses and those damn student loans. The amount I made as manager at an outdoor adventure shop was commensurate to the price of replacing myself at home. I had no particular preference between being the primary caretaker for our children or working full-time, buying and selling oversized backpacks with integrated water bladders. Both were equally appealing options. (I really believed in those backpacks.) Chris' degree, in computer engineering, was a pragmatic choice on his part, but hardly evidence of his inner motivations, passions, and desires, which is why he was working as few hours as possible as an independent consultant.

Growing up, I always assumed I'd have kids, but in an abstract way, not unlike the vague sense I have now that, before I die, I'm going to learn to play piano and speak fluent Spanish. During pregnancy, I heard the same cliché over again—"It's going to change your life!"—and always nodded in earnest even though neither I, nor the conversationalist, could articulate what this meant. I *did* think having children would be the cure to my indecisive, meandering ways. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich points out that motherhood "is *one part* of the female process; it is not an identity for all time." But in my limited understanding of the experience, I assumed once I became a mother, that's who—and what—I'd be. I expected at some point during my third trimester—or overnight, perhaps—to lose my exploratory, impulsive nature and, like someone who's been lobotomized, I wouldn't even know enough to care.

I still don't know where I got this idea. Even though it's been over half a century since Alice Balint wrote, "The ideal mother has no interests of her own," a lingering

model of the selfless mother has taken root somewhere deep inside. When economic and lactative practicalities determined for us that Chris work more and I stay home, I threw myself into having babies as I had done with all previous escapades. I devoured information on pregnancy, childbirth, and infant-care—in all of my previous adventures I could “brace for impact” (to borrow an airline term) with a quick study and an open mind. I wasn’t sure if staying home was what I wanted, but when have I ever known what I wanted?

I had no idea the desperation that would follow. It was not quiet. Desperation seemed to pour from my being. Even though I was doing everything I could to get it right—my newborns got breastmilk for antibodies, tummy time for neck strength, and a chirpy “Hola!” each morning for enriched language skills—I felt like I was in the wrong life. I thought maybe being indoors was making me crazy, so I walked to a nearby park. Isn’t this where mothers go? But I began to hate the park, where my anxiety worsened until, inevitably, I dreaded rounding the corner to see swing sets and merry-go-rounds jeering at me for pretending. I thought maybe I needed social interaction, so I attempted the coffee shop where one trip to a public bathroom with two newborns and a double stroller made me realize my gross over-estimation of a barista’s patience and the width of an average doorway.

I found myself in a state of utter confusion and paradox, not unlike the way I’d spent most of my life. My initial mid-nineteenth-century expectations of motherhood were destroying the experience, this much I could see. The qualities I expected to show up when my water broke—selflessness, patience, stability—were not coming naturally. As a backlash, I flipped to an opposite, more modern *modus operandi*: motherhood

doesn't have to slow you down or change you one bit. I see this message everywhere: from celebrity magazines to the uber-cool, downtown moms who run marathons and their own businesses. I returned to work, joined a gym, drank too much during "girls' night." Perusing the parenting section of the local bookstore didn't help; titles like *The Three Martini Playdate*, *Sippy Cups Are Not for Chardonnay*, and *Naptime Is the New Happy Hour* indicate that having kids is a big, lifelong party. As Daphne de Marneffe writes in *Maternal Desire*, "What we had in the previous ideal was a woman who lost herself to her children and her mothering. What we have in the supermom ideal is a woman who loses nothing."

In the midst of this confusion over what is best for me, what is best for my children, what becoming a mother means and what it doesn't, I was struggling with what I'm now calling "maternal dissociative identity disorder." Now, I don't necessarily have a degree in psychology, but the phenomenon needs a name and this is the one I've come up with. (My constant self-diagnoses via the Internet has made me presumptuous enough to invent psychological disorders.) I seemed to have multiple personalities that could change by the minute, all in reaction to having two newborns who simply needed care. What's worse, I blamed the identity crisis on my children. It's not an unreasonable response: what mother hasn't attempted to send an email, read a book, or go to the bathroom only to have her child pound at the keyboard, tear the pages, or throw her keys in the toilet? Sometimes I feel the more I try to accomplish something for myself, the more my children compete for my attention: as though it's a penalty for having ambition.

But "motherhood," as de Marneffe writes, "like any important relationship, contains love and hate, anger and goodwill, frustration and satisfaction. There is always

tension between the needs of the self and the needs of the other.” These small battles don’t mean that “children and mothers are the ‘causes’ of each others’ suffering,” one of many “unexamined assumptions” Rich identifies. No matter where on the spectrum a woman falls, from the sentimental to the progressive, she has often been implicitly led to believe that motherhood comes at the cost of one’s identity. Because caring for a child is what makes one a mother, then logic has it that the child is responsible for said mother’s loss of personal growth.

The supposition that motherhood conflicts with individuality and self-development is the basis of investigation for Marneffe. As a psychologist, she believes that “children crave parental love and attention and flourish when they have a lot of it.” However, as a feminist, she recognizes the objection that “there is something inherently life-narrowing for women to spend time caring for children.” Finally, as a question for professional and personal exploration, she asks, “How could something that is so necessary to children’s happiness simultaneously compromise women’s own?”

I wonder if the ever-popular concept of “balance” is further cause for confusion. I hear the word often: I’m instructed to “balance” work and leisure, eat a “balanced” diet, and find a “balance” between caring for others and myself. As with other ubiquitous expressions, I’m beginning to wonder if I understand what the word really means. A couple definitions of balance, as a verb, are “to arrange so that one set of elements exactly equals another” and “to bring into harmony or proportion.” Definitions for balance, as a noun, include “equipoise between contrasting or opposing elements,” and “an instrument supported freely in the center, stabilized by separate, but equal, weight.”

When I think of the elements that make up my life experience, they are neither separate nor equal, and I certainly feel neither stabilized nor freely supported.

After all, it was becoming a mother (in fact and then in practice) that awakened me to a route I'd been heading toward all along: I realized—with direction and focus this time—that I wanted to use my creative writing degree to actually *write*. I wanted to write about *motherhood*. I also wanted to take my passion for language and critical thought to *teach*. And as a graduate student who is a mother, teacher, and writer, looking toward a profession in which one constantly gets advice to find “balance” among the three, I ran this predicament by my mentor. He suggested I not look at it as “balance” so much as “relationship.” I’m not balancing my children against anything: we are integrated into one another’s lives. Teaching makes my writing better; writing makes me a better mother, and I doubt I’d be doing any of it if I didn’t have my children.

Isn’t this the kind of integration that makes up life? Despite our wishes otherwise, we can’t begin each moment from scratch. We incorporate what we’ve done, who we’ve been, what we’ve learned with everything that follows. Struggling to “balance” suggests we can compartmentalize our lives and stabilize each element equally with another. What’s worse is the implication that if we can’t, a collapse will follow.

Back when I felt sure that becoming a mother had snuffed out my ability for self-discovery, I did what I always do after the usual pattern of thought, confusion, panic: I called my younger sister for advice. She had her son sooner than she would have planned and it set a trajectory in motion that wasn’t one any of us would have predicted. With timidity (these questions are difficult) I got around to (politely) asking if she had regrets

about becoming a mother so soon. “Don’t you wish you would’ve had more time to figure out what you wanted?” I asked.

“But he’s shown me how much time I used to waste. I wasn’t figuring anything out at that rate,” she said.

It’s true; becoming a parent limits your free time, your choices, your flexibility. I used to think of these things as advantages to personal growth and capitalized on all of them. But the concept that having choices helps us get closer to what we want is only one perspective: the further I took my own freedom, the more discontent I felt.

To be clear, I’m not suggesting that any woman become a mother to “find” herself, or help kill time, for that matter. That’s what shopping malls are for. Rather, I’m suggesting to any mother, like myself, who suffers from “maternal dissociative identity disorder” that, while she’s busy mourning the “self” who feels lost after motherhood, there may be an even better version of her waiting to realize that she is not gone. Having a child doesn’t mean the search will be over—it’s just, as Rich writes, we search “through, against, and with the lives of our children,” just as we do anyone who has an impact on the sense of self. Rich elucidates the common assumption that the process of self-development is the child’s drama played out against the parents, who she describes as “givens.” She continues: “Nothing could have prepared me for the realization that I *was* a mother, one of those givens, when I knew I was still in a state of uncreation myself.”

I used to believe that my Thoreauvian impulse to simplify would be hindered by motherhood—that complications were part of the package. I didn’t realize motherhood is its own lesson in simplification. In her own search to separate motherhood as *experience*

from motherhood as *institution*—in other words, to simplify—Rich lists the roles middle-class women feel required to play, a list Ann Crittenden famously categories in *The Price of Motherhood*: entertainer, seductress, cook, governess, housekeeper, and nurse. Of these expectations Rich writes, “I only sensed that there were false distractions sucking at me, and I wanted desperately to strip my life down to what was essential.”

Perhaps it’s a matter of each woman deciding for herself which distractions need to go. So I don’t like parks. I’m not the only one: when I suggested to a friend, out of peer pressure, that we meet with the kids at a park, she motioned putting a gun to head. I was relieved to read the introduction of *Mother Reader*, where Moyra Davey writes, “To this day, when I walk by a gated playground I remember the boredom and isolation of the place and am thankful that my child has outgrown these pens for women and babies.”

I hear an echo of Thoreau in this desire to shed distractions...it seems that the search for an authentic life as a mother is quite similar to the search for an authentic life.

It’s been seven years since the night Chris and I made a list of places we’d live and we’re still in Kansas. It’s not that we no longer want to explore; we still travel, take up new interests, and eagerly absorb fresh ideas. It’s not that having a young family is stopping us; the kids prove to be up for anything we throw their way. It’s just that we don’t have the certainty some people have; people like my brother, who will never leave California, or my cousin, who was born in Louisiana and kept moving further north until he found his home in Alaska. Our problem seems to be that we end up settling nowhere because we feel a little right everywhere.

I'm content for now to think I might never know what I want, in a definitive sense—maybe the discovery is in the wanting—but I'm much more secure in who I am and no longer see my children as obstacles to getting there. Instead, they've gotten me closer to knowing, closer to being, in the same way they've given me something to write about. I identify with Nancy Chodorow, who wrote of herself and other feminists of her generation, “many of us were not prepared for the powerful, transformative claims that motherhood would make upon our identities and senses of self.” It seems contradictory that such a significant and irreversible change can make me who I've always been, that what seems most limiting can be so liberating, that such instability can make me feel so certain and secure. But, then, life is full of contradictions.

## New State of Being

*Having a baby takes a matter of hours;  
becoming a mother is a much more gradual transition.*

--Andrea Buchanan

I once got stoned at a baby shower. It's not like it sounds. No one knew what I was up to, least of all the mother-to-be. *I* didn't know what I was up to, exactly, until Sarah, a woman I just met, handed me a vaporizer pipe and said, "Pull in slowly, like you're taking a long drag."

I accepted Sarah's invitation to sneak upstairs to the loft of a stranger's house not so much to get high, but to get away. It had been a while since I last smoked pot and I was fully aware this wasn't the most appropriate time to re-initiate myself into the Cool Kids' Club. However, I had been curious about the vaporizer-thing ever since my cousin, who's from northern California, had Fed-Exed one overnight to our home when he was visiting for Christmas. Besides, I didn't want to be at this baby shower in the first place. I couldn't pinpoint why at the time. I just didn't.

It's occurring to me after a decade of attending baby showers, including my own, that they aren't very useful. Before I became a mother, my attitude toward showers fell into the category of indifference. I thought maybe I'd understand what the fuss was all about once I was actually pregnant or had babies. But now that I *have* been pregnant and had babies, my attitude has shifted from indifference to pure outrage. It's all I can do not to lash out at showers and start throwing the pink-laced multi-layered designer dress with matching *everything* back at the fool who bought it, yet I have a sneaking suspicion that some of the girls are wondering who the hell wraps up three bottles of Free-and-Clear Tide and calls it a gift.

We mothers who have been “broken in,” as Andrea Buchanan calls us in her essay collection, *Mother Shock*, know that the baby shower in no way prepares us for what it really means to bring another human being into the world, not just for a year or so, but for a lifetime. Yet there we all are, a pastel tornado blown in from divergent life stages, oohing and aahing equally over butt paste, swaddling blankets, and boppy pillows. When someone who doesn’t have children asks me what gift I recommend for a new mom, I want to say, “Forget the wipe-warmers and sleep positioners. What Betsy could really use is a live-in maid, chef, or nurse. Oh, that sounds unreasonable? Well, how about some sort of time capsule so she can catch up on all of the sleep she’s going to lose.”

It’s really a predicament that screams for a mind-altering substance.

In an attempt to understand why I can’t make it through baby showers sober, I decided to look at them through the lens of an anthropologist, as if I were doing an ethnographic study of a ritual to understand more about the culture from which it emerges. This little experiment proved to be quite fascinating: our current tradition of the baby shower is just a relatively new manifestation of some ancient and enduring rituals surrounding birth. And, like any ritual, birth rituals express social values: in other words, the baby shower tells us something about our cultural priorities.

Nearly every culture in the world marks the transition into motherhood ritually, and a look at birth rituals from the past demonstrates how they can be interpreted to understand which values and beliefs are important to a specific culture. For example, during the Middle Ages, the height of spiritual superstition, childbirth was associated

with spiritual danger just as much as physical. In labor, a woman confessed her sins to a priest in case she died during childbirth. In the event (indeed, likelihood) that the mother died, midwives were authorized to cut her open and retrieve the baby so it could be baptized immediately. During the Renaissance, an emerging trade economy emphasized personal property, so when a woman gave birth, she was gifted with objects that emphasized domesticity: trays for carrying food, linens, and decorations for the wall. In the Victorian era, known for its moral emphasis on sexual restraint, proper etiquette dictated that pregnant women did not appear in public. Women held ladies-only tea parties for a mother after she had given birth, and she often arrived in the afternoon sun with a parasol, which is how the umbrella became an icon for baby showers.

Fast-forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to the modern baby shower and the night I ended up in a stranger's loft with Sarah. Showers often feel like a collision between two worlds—one occupied by Mothers and one occupied by Other Women—with the mother-to-be smashed in the middle. That night, I had left my husband, twin sons, and mortgage payment in a new sub-development on the north side of town, and Sarah had given up a night out with her boyfriend, who was joining friends for sushi and an alternative rock show downtown. Sarah decided I could be included into the world of Other Women and invited me upstairs after overhearing me tell the honoree's grandmother about the time my pump-and-dump breast milk smelled like a White Russian.

I liked the grandmother. We hit it off immediately, trading sarcastic remarks about the Hallmark cards, rolling our eyes at the superfluous gifts, and exchanging stories about a mother's life in the trenches. It occurred to me that I was connecting with

someone else's grandmother in a more authentic way that I had with my own before she died, just a year earlier, when the twins were two.

I was lucky to have my grandmother at my own shower, along with my mother and my husband's mother and grandmother, a group of women who have collectively raised eighteen children. But the stories our mothers wanted to share were increasingly drowned out by the voices of women who had never actually *had* children but had done a lot of *reading* about having children. And my voice used to be the most self-assured of the group. Advice from my own mother who had five children, or my grandmother who had seven? I could take it or leave it. If the latest on-line parenting blog contradicted their wisdom, you can bet I just politely nodded and smiled with my eyes glazed over.

Looking back, I realize how often I've implied that I know more than the experienced mothers in my life. I'm ashamed to admit that I may be a woman Susan Maushart describes in *The Mask of Motherhood*: "Ironically, we of the present postfeminist generation seem to have lost respect for the wisdom of women who have traveled the path of motherhood before us."

For example, at my own shower, I mentioned my intrigue with a *New York Times* article I'd read on the benefits of drinking small amounts of red wine during pregnancy as a protective measure against preterm birth.

"Maria, it's not rocket science," one of my aunts quipped. "The French have known that for centuries."

Regardless of what the French have and have not been doing post-Enlightenment, I decided not to risk it and continued to sip my sparkling water with lemon. Another time, I asked my mother-in-law if she wanted to watch me make baby food. I had recently

purchased a baby food cookbook and fancy gadget that steamed and pureed and thought I was onto something pretty cutting-edge.

My mother-in-law made her own baby food in the seventies and surely realizes women have been doing the same since time immemorial. Furthermore, she undoubtedly understands that “baby food” is just regular food that has been mashed, pureed, or cut into small bits. However, for my sake, she looked on, appearing to be fascinated but most likely thinking, *You spent \$19.99 on baby food recipes?*

At times we must seem like we are re-inventing the wheel, with scientific backing to do so. But for a more experienced mother to point this out would be perceived as an insult: Maushart writes, “Ours is possibly the only civilization in the history of humanity in which the handing down of mothering wisdom from mother to daughter is seen as a breach of familial etiquette, as a form of ‘bad taste’ strenuously avoided by both parties.”

I’m part of a generation of women who, as Maushart writes, “are relying less and less on family, and more and more on classes, books, and institutions in the transition to motherhood.” Since August 6, 2004, the day double lines appeared on that little life-changing white plastic wand, I have sought out and devoured all the latest technology and information I can get my hands on regarding the health and safety of my offspring. It’s not just maintenance I’m after either; oh no, I want to turn my children into demi-gods and I’m told I can do it by listening to Mozart while pregnant, hanging black-and-white geometric mobiles above their cribs, and teaching them to count to ten in five different languages by the time they’re two. God help the person who tries to stand between me and my ergonomically correct, gender-neutral baby carrier.

In *Maternal Desire*, Daphne De Marneffe describes this mindset as “the orientation toward ‘having,’ as opposed to ‘being’” as defined by psychoanalyst Erich Fromm over twenty-five years ago. “When we are oriented to having, our agenda is to possess,” she writes. “We consume not only material goods, but also information, education, and experience, and we define ourselves by what we consume.”

If we study the modern baby shower to learn something about our culture, we see this orientation toward “having” emerge. The most glaring aspect of contemporary showers is the emphasis on both mother and baby as consumers of material goods. It seems pretty clear to me that the message of the baby shower is that a mother needs *stuff*: that the process of becoming a mother involves an accumulation of baby-specific “things,” just as much as having the actual baby. It was only after World War II and the consumer ideology of the 1950s, that we moved our celebrations to *precede* the birth, something few other cultures do, which has the consequence of establishing a social identity for the unborn child as a tiny little consumer. It also subverts the relationship between ritual and event, so that showers, as birth rituals, don’t function in the process of motherhood as originally intended.

To understand showers from an anthropological viewpoint is to understand a few things about motherhood as a rite of passage. A rite of passage, as first detailed by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in the early 1900’s, is an event that marks a person’s social transition into a new state of being. Van Gennep divided the rite of passage into three parts: separation (from the community), transition (into the new state), and re-incorporation (back into the community). In their different forms, birth rituals are social events that contribute to the third stage—re-incorporation—of a woman’s new identity—

mother—into the larger community. Of course, birth rituals don't make a woman a "mother" anymore than decorating a 7<sup>th</sup> grader's locker with maxi pads when she's had her first period makes her a "woman." This is why rituals tell us more about the culture than the individual.

A dangerous implication of the orientation toward "having" emerges if we consider a common occurrence *following* the baby shower and subsequent births of both baby *and* mother. Marneffe writes that "We live in a culture that enshrines acquisitions but profanes care." Using our cultural perceptions of motherhood as an example, she writes, "there are countless media images of the miracle of pregnancy or the adorableness of babies but little that represents the day-to-day care of children." She's not the first to make a distinction between becoming a mother *in fact* and becoming a mother *in practice*; between the desire to *have* a baby and the desire to *care* for a baby.

The kind of high I was getting during my friend's shower is nothing compared to the high of pregnancy and birth. While I'm not the type of woman who felt radiant or glowing during pregnancy, I did experience the "mania," as de Marneffe describes it, "getting pregnant, being pregnant, and having a baby, for the sense of power and expansiveness it brings." Our cultural emphasis on ownership as a sign of worth, Marneffe says, takes the feelings of specialness and entitlement surrounding pregnancy and bearing children to a new level.

However, she continues, "there is the high of having a baby, and then there is the rest of life." We often describe giving gifts at baby showers as preparing a woman for motherhood, but, as Marneffe points out, there is something about the gifts we give,

“about the very way their beauty exceeds their functionality,” that represents the glaring incongruence between the experience of pregnancy and the experience of parenting a child. Instead of preparing the mother-to-be for this reality, the contemporary American baby shower only exacerbates the distortion.

Considering that showers are supposed to mark the re-incorporation of a new mother into the world, it’s ironic that all of those gifts turn the focus more on the unborn child than the woman giving birth. The mom-to-be gets a little lost under all that wrapping paper. And why shouldn’t she? After all, she hasn’t really gone through the first two stages—separation and transformation—yet. But because we celebrate her birth as a mother before she’s actually had the baby, we’re telling her she’s prepared for what’s to come—and, apparently, it’s not going to last very long. Our gifts have a limited shelf life: how many 0-3-month onesies does a household really need? The trinkets, clothes, and gadgets we give new mothers suggest that “having a baby” is just that: she will have a baby, use the commodities, and after the first year—POOF!—it’s over. She’s survived motherhood.

The deceiving implications of this set-up became obvious to me after I took the long fall down after the high of giving birth. No material objects or intellectual understanding could equip me for the process that is *Becoming a Mother*. For some reason, even though I grew up around two generations of mothers, I knew very little about the reality of the transformation, not just in the weeks and months after birth, but in the years, the lifetime. The thing that shocked me most was that I didn’t feel like a mother after I had given birth. I had no idea what to do with the two newborns in front of me. My husband seemed more natural at holding them and changing their diapers than I

did. I was also surprised when, after months of caring for them fulltime, I didn't love that, either. In fact, every day that I was home made me feel less like I was capable of mothering. It was in the middle of the night one night, during sleep deprivation reaching tortuous levels, that I peered into the bassinet holding my two infants and realized that they were not going anywhere—that “having a baby” is having a *human being* and “becoming a mother” is *for life*—and surrounded by my changing table, glider, matching ottoman, and piles of books, I felt very alone.

In her introduction to *Mother Shock*, Buchanan describes her preparation for motherhood, listing the books she read, the websites she visited, and the equipment she bought. But after giving birth she realizes, “I had spent the past nine months learning how to be pregnant, not how to be a mother.” She asks ‘ “Why had people been talking about slings and bouncy seats instead of telling me what motherhood is really like?”

After having her first baby, my best friend said, “I equated being a mom with giving birth. Somehow I didn't think about the years that would come *after* the birth.” Susan Maushart noticed this trend among many women in our generation and writes, “We recoil in horror to think that our mothers and grandmothers entered the labor ward in utter ignorance of the ordeal that awaited them. And rightly so. Yet I suspect the depth of our own ignorance of the afterbirth experience is greater still, and more dangerous by far.”

I've heard a variety of explanations for my generation's self-described isolation from children and motherhood, including smaller family size, more relocations, and expanded career opportunities for women. My technologically-savvy husband says the

Internet plays a huge role in this trend, creating an “accelerated generation gap.” Because we can so quickly look to all corners of the globe for guidance and advice, the crevice widens each generation, between what we learn from our mothers, what our mothers learned from their mothers, and our grandmothers from theirs. He’s right; I love my Google, and for good reason. Anytime there is physiological confusion in the household my obsessing takes over around 3 a.m. and I type things in the search engine like “nipples have more than one hole?” Immediately, I have my answer and peace of mind. There is nothing like having thousands of people wondering about the same set of oddities to make you feel more normal.

In addition to these explanations, I wonder if an anthropological analysis of showers gives us further insight regarding the disconnect so many women in my generation experience in our transition to the land of Mothers from the land of Other Women. We host showers with good intentions: honoring pregnancy and birth, inviting our mothers and grandmothers, giving gifts we sincerely believe will make a mother’s life easier. But what if, as mothers whose duty it is to mark a woman’s transition into a new state of being, we emphasize an orientation of “being” rather than “having?” “When we are oriented to being, our agenda is to be ‘at one with’,” de Marneffe writes. “We are concerned not so much with things as with *processes* of living, knowing, and loving. We seek after authentic relatedness with other people. We seek to get beyond appearances and plumb the depths.”

I can’t be alone in my belief that showering a mother-to-be with “authentic relatedness” would be much more useful for her impending transition than showering her with gadgets and games. It’s never been clear to me why we spend the much-needed

opportunity we get in the company of so many experienced women to sniff chocolate bars ground into diapers. I often wonder if these activities serve as distractions during a rare opportunity to congregate with other women from all stages in life and have a genuine discussion with those who have blazed the path before us.

Perhaps this predicament has become more urgent to me since losing my maternal grandmother, Jean. Although I spent weeks at a time with her while growing up, I never really felt like I *knew* her. What I knew about her was what I learned through photographs and stories. She and her sister were knock-outs when they were young, with young men lined up at the door to date them. She was a generous and fair mother who had made it through hard times by sewing dresses out of old curtains and ensuring that everyone had equal, albeit tiny, portions of meat at dinner. She was ambitious, going back to school after her children were grown and her husband had died, to earn her degree and learn Spanish while she was at it.

But these are the stories everyone knows about her, the type of stories that blur the line between their subject as person and as legend. Her seven children swear by her perfection as a mother and her unwavering kindness. But the longer I experience the process of becoming a mother—which has dissuaded me from “having” and attracted me toward “being”—the more I want to “plumb the depths.” I wish I could hear from my grandmother about the times she *didn't* feel like such a good mom. The times she *wasn't* so nice. I want to know if she ever felt suffocated by her responsibilities as a wife and mother and fantasized about running away. I guess I want to know if she was ever like me.

Certainly, in our search for information between what is new and progressive and what is gleaned from experience and stands the test of time, we can find a middle ground. I can't help but think that, whether we do things the same way generations of women before us did, or attempt to try something entirely new, our consumption of objects and information has an unintended implication to the mothers in our lives: *You didn't do it right. I can do it better. I have gadgets, books, search engines.* All of these tools have their advantages (I doubt neither my mother nor mother-in-law would appreciate routine 3 a.m. wake-up calls regarding the number of holes in my nipples), but we pay a price for the convenience and anonymity. The times I have sought out another mother's advice or explanations, it turns into much more than finding quick answers. The conversations turn from practical and physiological to emotive and psychological. I learn of her history and experiences, regrets and triumphs, insecurities and accomplishments. I discover that Becoming a Mother is not only a rite of passage, but also a state of being that unfolds over a lifetime.

## The Price of Things

*If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water,  
how can you buy them?*

*Teach your children that we have taught our children  
that the earth is our mother.*

--Ted Perry, as inspired by Chief Seattle's Treaty Oration 1854

The next best thing to being one of the blond, blue-eyed identical twin girls with long legs and dusty feet, tearing through a small-town-America summer in their dad's stick-shift Toyota pickup, was being their best friend. This was back when John Mellencamp was John Cougar Mellencamp and guava pink toenail polish was *in*. We ate at the diner on their parents' credit and ordered French fries (with white gravy) and peanut-butter-chocolate milkshakes before heading to the swimming pool. The twins were three years older than me and drove barefoot; I will never forget how those tanned, smooth legs looked as they lengthened to press the clutch. The twins had *horses*. More than one.

My memory of that small town in Kansas is a blur of dust and space. The horizon never ended. There was enough room for thirteen-year-olds to drive around without a license, for fireworks in the front yard, and for Pumpkin, Micah, and Domino to jump the fence and wander down Main Street. There was enough room for a fresh start; Dad had stayed behind in Texas temporarily while Mom moved my sister and me to southern Kansas for her new job, teaching at the high school.

We were poor. We started the summer with few possessions—another teacher had loaned my mother a mattress we all slept on, a card table, and folding chairs—but with lots of adventures. For a child who didn't care about social airs, it didn't get much better than living in a house with no furniture. My recollection of that time resembles a summer Adrienne Rich describes as her most cherished with her sons: "We lived half-naked,

stayed up to watch bats and stars and fireflies, read and told stories, slept late. We lived like castaways on some island of mothers and children.” Fewer clothes meant my sister and I could eat, sleep, and play in our bathing suits, which was reasonable, as we went swimming every day. When we weren’t at the pool, we were at the library, collecting books that would lull us to sleep past midnight. I met the twins one afternoon at the snow-cone stand, where they were sitting atop horses, licking raspberry-flavored ice, and I knew they would surpass spectacular.

They invited me into their home, a two-story Victorian *with* furniture. I was impressed by their microwave, dishwasher, and club-house in the backyard. In addition to the three horses, they had fish and hamsters and kittens. There were always so many kittens! Their older sister, with the trademark blond hair, was in high school and would often yell at us to “Grow Up!” after we performed for her. Skits, fashion shows, songs we lip-synched and songs we wrote.

The twins were some of the few friends I had who weren’t interested in growing up. They seemed to understand that the older people got, the less happy they were and boy, did they love being happy. They had imagination enough to compensate for their more pensive friends. We waded to an islet in the river and pretended to be stranded on a tropical island. We captured fireflies in jars and lit up the living room, where we sprawled on the floor in sleeping bags. We entered our artwork in the local fair, talked about how much we loved God, and discussed the logistics of French-kissing boys. In addition to snow-cones, fries, and milkshakes, we ate hotdogs and apples and potato salad. We cried when we had to be apart, even if it was just for the night.

My family moved again, two years later. Dad was back, and thought he could be happier at another new job, in another new town. This one was bigger: a land-grant university town, with a shopping mall. We had more stuff now—a microwave of our own, new shoes, a T.V. I learned about Earth Day that year. Bette Midler sang “From A Distance,” and my little sister started a compost pile in the back yard. I learned that the air was being polluted and that the landfills were getting really big. I threw my banana peels in Crystal’s compost for a few days, and collected pop-cans for recycling, but I passed fifth grade and the earth seemed the same as ever, so I thought maybe my church was right: those crazy environmentalist hippies were just trying to scare us and it wasn’t very Christian to be worried about the earth when we knew good and well that Jesus was coming back soon. (Although, my dad assured me, Jesus wouldn’t come back before I had a chance to go to prom.)

My long-distance childhood friendship with the twins lasted longer than most, but this is no *Beaches*. After letters and phone calls that trickled into high school, we lost touch. I heard through the grapevine that, after a stint in New York City resulting in an anorexic-driven modeling career and failed sit-com pilot, they moved back to the Midwest, to be closer to home.

I became interested in finding the twins again after I had twins of my own. Getting married, having kids, and being addicted to coffee means I am officially grown up, which means I am also trying to reconnect with my childhood. I wonder if the twins’ transition into a new century has been as rocky as it was for the rest of us: me, Mellencamp, Midler, and the gang. Those hot, Midwestern days we spent at the pool, back when the World Trade Center stood as a symbol of American achievement, the

Material Girl could be heard through the airwaves. When the lifeguards got in trouble for playing George Michael's "I Want Your Sex" over the loud speaker, "Like a Virgin" seemed much more appropriate for school children. This month, twenty years later, Madonna is on the cover of *Vanity Fair's* "Green Issue." But instead of the usual attention she gets over her great body and bad movies, the focus is on her recent adoption of an African orphan.

It seems like everyone is adopting orphans from Africa these days. Or, at least, from somewhere other than here. Madonna explained, "If you have children, you know you're responsible for somebody... you start to second-guess everything you value, and the suffering of other children becomes much more intolerable."

Madonna is starting to make more sense to me. While I paid some attention to humanitarian and environmental issues before I became a mother, these things have become much more urgent now that I have a specific future in which I am invested. It seems like an evil irony to fill my children's impending geographic playground with plastic diapers and empty Gerber jars. Chris and I ordered two dozen of the new-generation cloth diapers, prepared homemade baby food in a crock-pot, and threw the resulting peels into our compost. We try to get around by bike and trailer more than we drive the mini-van, made the switch to local, organic, and humanely raised animal products, and employ a curbside recycling service.

We turned into crazy environmentalist hippies. And sometimes it doesn't seem like enough.

Sometimes, when I hear that one American child creates the environmental footprint of six from a third world country, I feel guilty for having any. In *Maternal*

*Desire*, Daphne de Marneffe addresses the environmental concerns parents face this way: “In this, as in many other consequential decisions, we confront a central tensions of parenthood, between our concern for the greater good and our commitment to the health and happiness of our own.”

A perfect example of this quandary involves our family’s taste for quinoa. It’s not often that everyone in our family agrees on what they want to eat for dinner, especially when the consensus is described by NASA scientists as “virtually unrivaled in the plant or animal kingdom for its life-sustaining nutrients.” But even Sola, at eighteen months, gobbles up this nutty grain-like substance imported from Boliva so fast I can barely keep up with her signed requests for “more.” But as soon as I’m recommending it to my friends and neighbors, Chris points to an article that raises concern for our country’s recent soar in demand of the crop: now Bolivians, who have lived off quinoa for centuries, can’t afford one of their biggest exports and are eating cheap, processed foods instead.

What’s a mother to do? Just when I think that I’ve reduced my carbon footprint substantially by wearing Patagonia shoes made out of recycled tires, I read a headline in the New York Times: “Did Your Shopping List Kill a Songbird?”

This type of headline always pulls me in.

It turns out that the number of Bobolinks, a North American songbird, has been cut in half in the last four decades. The Bobolink travels to Latin America in the winter, where pesticides used on exported produce are so highly toxic they are illegal in the United States. Why are pesticides so prevalent in Latin America? Because this is the way to keep up with American demand for out-of-season produce, which has skyrocketed

since the 1980's. The answer to saving the songbird is choosing to buy organic versions of two items in particular that are the biggest offenders, due to their dependency on fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and insecticides: bananas and coffee.

Has my family adjusted our ever-expanding grocery budget to accommodate the change? Yes. Have I ever cared about or even heard of a Bobolink before this? No.

The first foods we increased our grocery budget for were the animal products: eggs, milk, and, when we treated ourselves, chicken and red meat. Next, we replaced chemical-laden produce I found listed under “The Dirty Dozen.” Then, went the coffee. I will not be held responsible for killing a songbird. And I make it clear to the boys why we eat and live the way we do.

My children will never know any other way than this increased consciousness of global-connectedness. It's not that only recently our decisions in Kansas directly affect someone else's life in Shanghai, or a songbird in Argentina. It's just that now we cannot plead ignorance. Globalization has taught me that the “isms” I support—humanitarianism, environmentalism, multiculturalism—are connected. Devastatingly, brilliantly, urgently connected.

It is not all bad, either. Just a trip through the library the other day brought me to a display named: “Interfaith Dialogue: Moving Towards Mutual Appreciation.” The sign was posted above a collection of books on religions across the world. While it is unfortunate that there is a demand for a book entitled, “The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Islam,” the gesture does not go unnoticed. I was with the twins, *Thomas the Tank Engine* books in hand, and I become very excited about the world they are living in. I don't know why, exactly, but I've always gravitated towards cultural diversity

and understanding. Not just acceptance, but celebration of people who are different, has been emphasized for generations in my family, who, ironically enough, never settled much past Kansas.

This awareness of so many living beings in the world makes me a bit claustrophobic, even when I'm alone, tilling the soil in my modest, but substantial garden. The food I place in front of my children, the clothes we wear, the car we drive: these things have an impact on *all* life; life, I believe, that is not less, or more, equal in value to my own. My concerns over all of the "ism" issues coalesce in my viewpoint on sustainability. Sustainability, in regard to our planet's capacity to endure, is often described as the reconciliation between three factors: environment, society, and economy. The word "sustainability" is derived from the Latin *sustinere*, which can be broken into two parts: *tenere*; to hold, and *sus*; up. In the simplest way I can define it, sustainability comes down to two rules we learn as children: leave things the way you find them and treat others the way you want to be treated.

What paralyzes me at times, however, is that the costs of living never seem to end. *Most* of the time, I am eager to become more educated about my decisions and the consequences of my actions. But I have a tendency to gravitate to extremes. When I decide to take up running, it's going to be in a marathon; if I notice a scratch on the wall, the entire room gets painted; when I let my brother know I was pregnant with twins, his response was, "That's so typical of you."

It's because of this very existence—the seriousness and unwavering consciousness with which I function on a daily basis—that sometimes a part of me wants to toss the glass bottles in the trash, take the mini van out for a joy ride, and smoke a

cigarette, just so I can flick the non-biodegradable butt onto a nature preserve. It never feels like I'm doing enough. Recently, when I told a friend where I found some crib sheets made from organic cotton, she mentioned she was getting an entirely new crib.

“It's expensive,” she said, “because it's made of sustainable, fair-trade wood with a non-toxic finish and includes a natural rubber-and-wool mattress that hasn't been treated with any oil or chemicals.”

Silence. One of the rare times I had nothing to say.

I contemplated the earth-destroying cancer-causing death traps my children are currently sleeping on and made the mental note to add a reason under “pros” to the co-sleeping debate: no need to take out a loan for a new crib.

My friend is right, though. It cost money to be an ethically minded consumer. In a short online documentary, *The Story of Stuff*, the viewer speeds through the entire process—from harvest to landfill—of a Radio Shack electronic gadget. For something that took a mere twenty minutes of my time, the documentary has had a long-lasting impact. I realized that, although the monetary price of an item may be low, the cost in resources (that eventually cost *someone* in other ways) is much higher. Since then, I've stopped thinking of anything I buy, whether it's food, clothes, or toys, as “cheap.”

Still, as Notorious B.I.G. said, “mo money, mo problems.” I'm lucky to have enough to spend on sustainability concerns. But the same concerns prove to be quite paralyzing and conducive to guilt. Without Chris or I spending much money on them, my children always receive more than they need in terms of clothes and toys. I know that friends and family give out of love and generosity, but my sympathies for sustainability have rendered it difficult for me to utter a simple “thank you,” because I can only

imagine the t-shirt or plastic train in my hand, the one made in Thailand, has had devastating consequences for another child across the globe.

This is not how I want to be. I don't want to be so overbearing about sustainability that my friends feel like they have to hide their plastic bags when they come to my home for a potluck, as a few of mine once jokingly admitted to doing. One friend, who loves to incite debate, said he thinks sustainability issues have become like a dominant religion in our culture, with naysayers and heretics forced to the fringe. "So we're fucking everything up," he said. "It's called 'survival of the fittest'." I can either respect his viewpoint, or banish him and his plastic bags and lose an engaging friend. It's true that the way I live, in terms of sustainability, is based on a set of values I've come to over time; I can't expect everyone to oblige, intellectually, emotionally, or financially.

When I was growing up, and my mom couldn't afford any type of new bed for us, let alone a sustainably sourced one, she didn't have to struggle with the dilemma of abundance. We also lived with a smaller environmental footprint out of necessity; our summer in small-town-Kansas, she, my sister, and I each had one plate, bowl, cup, and set of utensils. We ate rice and garden-tomatoes most evenings and walked everywhere we went. And, appropriately enough, we all remember this as one of the best summers we had together.

Chris and I are planning a move to the Bay Area, one of the most expensive places in the country to live. We recently met with a couple from the Midwest who have also relocated to California. They asked if we've adjusted to the "sticker shock" regarding home-ownership and the answer is, we may never. We plan on transitioning

from homeowners in Kansas, to renting indefinitely in Silicon Valley. While there are a number of political and economic reasons the price of housing is so high in California, a reassurance offered by Pete, Chris' colleague, made the most sense to me.

“They value the land here,” Pete said. “You can't just build a new sub-development anywhere you want.”

California is known for its land-conservation efforts. Within minutes of leaving the city, we had our choice among several national parks, forests, and trails for a run. Compared to our experience in Kansas, the houses and yards feel like they are on top of each other in the Bay Area. But I'm also not used to so many protected areas in the Midwest.

Because my siblings live in California and Chris's company is based in Palo Alto, we visit the state often. Normally, when the plane wheels touch down on our return flight, I feel the wide-open Kansas prairie reach her arms around me and I breathe easier. “It's so crowded out there,” I often say after returning from the West Coast.

But after our most recent trip in search of rental property, on the drive home from the airport, I considered Pete's perspective about the land and lost count of the isolated McMansion communities sprawled out on the otherwise pristine rolling hills outside Kansas City. This isn't to say California is without its own development issues, but I'm reminded of the approach to sustainability that works best for me: I often need to spend more money, time, compassion, effort, or patience in order for things to hold up: *sustinere*. Sometimes, *sustinere* requires all of these things at once.

Like anyone who waxes nostalgic, I miss the innocence and ignorance of sustainability issues I had growing up. I miss *not* feeling guilty about driving around in a

truck with my friends, eating hotdogs and non-organic apples, using a million paper napkins while raspberry ice dripped down our chins. This generation of twins will never know the space and simplicity that the other set knew. Whether my children grow up in the Bay Area of California, their current hometown in Kansas, or somewhere in between, they will always be mindful of the importance, challenges, and beauty of this planet's capacity to endure.

**ii. coccyx**

**intuitive** \in-tü-ə-tiv, -tyü-\ *adj.* of perceptive insight; knowledge without the conscious use of rational process

## Sitting, Still

*Oh, mothers! Dear noble, selfless, tender and ferocious  
defenders of progeny all across nature's phylogeny:  
How well you deserve our admiration as Mother's Day draws near,  
and how photogenically you grace the greeting cards  
that we thrifty offspring will send in lieu of a proper gift.*  
--Natalie Angier

I never realized how much I took sitting for granted until I couldn't do it. That's right, sitting. Sitting on a couch, sitting in a chair, sitting in a car. Sitting to work, to eat, to rest. I couldn't do any of it. I know I'm in bad shape when the thought of sitting to *rest* brings tears to my eyes because of the pain.

Anyone who has suffered from coccydynia knows what I'm talking about. In the past few years, I've discovered that there are two types of people in the world: those of us who know the location and history of our coccyx and those who don't know what the hell a coccyx is. Obviously, I fit into the former category. So does my friend Jamie, who was born without a coccyx and is one of few people not to have spina bifida as a result. (Lacking wisdom teeth as well, she jokes that she's an advanced link in the evolutionary chain.) Chris, my best friend's husband, joined the coccyx club when he sustained an injury on the junior-high football field that took him to the emergency room for x-rays of his lower spine. The bottom segment of his coccyx had broken off and is floating around somewhere in his body to this day, though you would never know by looking at him.

The list goes on. My friend Liz hurt hers snowboarding. She says it's kind of like the appendix: "You have no need for it, never think about it, until there's a problem. It's just evolutionary leftovers that'll get you in trouble every once in awhile."

My own coccyx's journey has entailed a more convoluted path. The first time its location was brought to my attention was during labor with my twin sons. While Luke--Baby A--was in position for takeoff, Taj--Baby B--was forced to wait at the end of the

runway, which happened to be located in the space that normally houses my tailbone. No one, absolutely *no one*, could touch me during back labor except for my sister, Crystal. She knew exactly where to apply the right amount of pressure to relieve the pain in my lower back. Because of the physical exertion required of my body, I didn't have much energy to consider the *reason* for my back pain; as long as Crystal's hand was there, I could ignore it. (I was not especially pleased when she took a bathroom break and a nurse tried to sub. A woman in labor does not like change unless she has specifically requested it.)

Three days later, when I was out of the hospital bed and sitting on our sofa, I noticed sitting was not as easy as it used to be. In fact, it was downright painful. I mentioned this to my sister, who suggested that it might have something to do with the frequent kicking she could feel through my back during labor. *She could feel kicking through my back.* That just doesn't seem natural.

"Lovely," I thought. "Not only can I not *stand* for fear that my insides will fall right out, but now I can't even *sit*." I looked at Taj's foot, which was not much bigger than a peanut shell. My first lesson in the inverse relationship of parenting: for such tiny little things, our offspring can make some very big demands.

The truth of the matter is, I'm not much of a baby person. Newborns can be pretty boring, and I don't find them particularly cute. But, because of our cultural understanding of maternal instinct, most people assume that pregnant women *love* babies. When I was pregnant, people were always throwing babies at me.

"You must want all the practice you can get!" they would say.

And I would hold the floppy, pointy creature at arm's length until my husband, who *is* a baby-person, took it from me and whispered, "I've never *seen* anyone look so awkward."

Even though I belong to the generation of third-wave feminists, I thought I could get into big trouble, or at least be socially shunned if I, as a woman, admitted I wasn't a baby person. But by the time I had the twins, it was probably easy to tell. Once I watched a dog give birth to a litter of puppies. She did it with incredible grace, moving silently with an air of dignity about her. It was her first time, but giving birth to a half-dozen offspring seemed like something she had practiced all her life. As soon as one slipped out, she licked it clean and swallowed the placenta. She then nuzzled it into a heaping pile of puppies that wrapped themselves together and slept while she pushed out another. (I called my mother afterwards: "Have you ever watched a dog give birth?" I asked. "It's incredible!" "Uh, no, but I've done it five times myself," she replied. "Does that count for anything?")

But for all the ease and care that came naturally to the dog, I'll never forget the way she looked when the puppies were nursing. She lay on her side, panting, her belly loose and sagging. After the puppies nursed for a while, she looked at me with dark, tired eyes that seemed to say, "I'm sick of this shit," and stood up. Each of the puppies slipped from their latch on her nipples and fell to the ground, one by one. As they wriggled blindly, mewling and crying, she staggered away, into the sun.

For all of the intuition she demonstrated while giving birth, I was surprised when she walked away for some self-preservation. After all, isn't maternal instinct selfless in nature? Shortly after I gave birth, I remembered her awkward, self-centered gesture and

the puppies falling to the ground. It's one thing not to be a baby person when you don't have babies; it's another thing when two of them are strapped in the back of your car on the way home from the hospital. I was in a desperate search for my maternal instinct, something I thought would show up during pregnancy but didn't. Don't mothers love their babies even before they're born, when they're still in the womb? While I was pregnant, I could think only of how unnatural it felt to have a living creature moving around inside me. *There's room enough in this body for only one of us*, I thought, *and I've been here the longest.*

What components constitute "maternal instinct"? It's an elusive term; but however one defines it, I didn't feel like I had it once the boys were born. While they slept in the bassinet, I would whisper, "I love you" in their direction. I practiced saying it when no one was around, for fear that if someone overheard, he or she would detect the insincerity in my voice, notice how unnatural it sounded. The truth is that I didn't know a damn thing about either of them and that there were two made them even more difficult to know. Ambivalence and uncertainty gave way to guilt, and by then, I was afraid I'd spend the rest of my life not sure if I loved my children.

To what degree is "maternal instinct" innate? In his memoir on fatherhood, *Home Game*, Michael Lewis writes, "maternal love may be instinctive, but paternal love is learned behavior." His assumption regarding maternal love is common, but I identified more with his assessment of parenthood than any other I've read: "The thing that most surprised me about fatherhood the first time around was how long it took before I felt about my child what I was expected to feel. I was able to generate tenderness and a bit of

theoretical affection, but after that, for a good six weeks, the best I could manage was detached amusement.”

Around Mother’s Day of 2006, a year after I had the twins, Natalie Angier wrote an article for *The New York Times* that caught my attention: “One Thing They Aren’t: Maternal.” In an ironic tribute to the Hallmark holiday, she points out the dark side of motherhood in animals that isn’t widely known or celebrated: “As much as we may like to believe that mother animals are designed to nurture and protect their young, to fight to the death, if need be, to keep their offspring alive, in fact, nature abounds with mothers that defy the standard maternal script in a raft of macabre ways.” She continues with examples of mother pandas who abandon one of their twins after the other has proved to be stronger, eagles who watch as siblings peck the youngest one to death, and sharks who incubate up to 20 eggs per womb, so that when the sharklets begin to develop, they have each other to munch on, with only one ultimately surviving.

When the coccyx is fractured or dislocated, it can take six to twelve weeks for the pain to subside. My injury bothered me for roughly the first nine weeks postpartum, not the ideal time to be suffering from chronic pain. (Okay, I suppose there *isn’t* an ideal time to be suffering from chronic pain, but...) While breastfeeding twins presented a number of challenges, the most difficult may have been managing the pain of sitting. In order to nurse twins in tandem (which I preferred, in order to be done faster), I had to sit upright with a ridiculous-looking but very useful device, a twin-nursing pillow. While most new mothers seem to need an entourage of people and contraptions when they learn to nurse, I must have appeared especially demanding. Not only did I need the over-sized, U-shaped

pillow strapped around my waist to support the boys, but I also needed at least four more pillows placed strategically around my back, butt, and thighs. If one of my reinforcements went awry, tears flowed. Either the boys would wail because I had to interrupt their meal to adjust, or I would wail because I did not want to interrupt their meal and instead endured the dull ache throbbing down my legs and up my back.

Upon further exploration of fatherhood, Michael Lewis attempts to pinpoint how he changed from feeling “obligatory sadness” at the thought of his daughter getting rolled over by a truck to feeling compelled to be the one who throws himself in front of said truck to save her. He writes, “The simple act of taking care of a living creature, even when you don’t want to, maybe especially when you don’t want to, is transformative. All the little things that you must do for a helpless creature to keep it alive cause you to love it.”

In 2006, a group of researchers discovered that an African infant amphibian, the *Boulengerula taitanus*, depends solely on its mother’s skin for nutrition for the first month of its life. The earthworm-like hatchlings are born with special teeth made for peeling and eating skin. Biologists studying the female noticed that the skin of the brooding females had a fat-rich, nutritious outer-layer of skin almost twice as thick as that of non-brooding females. The little hatchlings chomp their way around her body, eating her skin in the spiral way we peel an orange. The mother lies there without protest, covered by her offspring. Headlines after the discovery read: “An Extreme Parental Sacrifice!” and “The B. Taitanus Give the Skin Off Their Backs!”

As time went by, I could sit square on my bum without wincing. I weaned the boys, the seasons changed, and this new life became more comfortable. One day in January, after a particularly bad winter storm, the boys and I went to visit my sister. I was nervous about driving on the snowy, icy streets, but I couldn't take another day cooped inside with two two-year-olds. The visit went well, and the boys exhausted themselves tearing around the house with their cousin. As we walked out the door, Crystal reminded me of the ice. "Be careful," she said. "Remember, it's slick."

I walked steadily through the snow, holding hands with Taj and Luke, as we made our way to the car. I lifted Luke from the curb and put him in the car seat while Taj waited by my side. I then picked up Taj, carried him to the other side, and reached for the door.

In what felt like slow motion, my right foot skidded across ice, and I started to fall backwards. *I cannot let my son hit the ground*, I thought. I held onto him tightly, with both arms, unable to stop my fall. My tailbone hit the ground first, and I lay flat on my back on the icy street like a human mattress for a thirty-pound child. A familiar strain crept through my body, starting with my hips and spreading up to my neck.

What has shaped my understanding of maternal instinct? I remember some lessons in maternal instinct from my junior high years, lessons of a mother's impulse to protect or sacrifice. We moved to a new town when I was in eighth grade and, disappointed that my school didn't sponsor an opportunity to slow-dance awkwardly with my crush, I took matters into my own hands by organizing a Valentine's dance. After saving up my babysitting money, I rented the Knights of Columbus hall, bought pink and

red streamers, and invited my older brother to come home from college to DJ. (He was also a great dancer, able to do the robot and moonwalk.) I made and passed around invitations at school. We had just relocated from a big, university town, and I didn't understand just how small our small-town was. Word got around quickly about my dance and the classmates who didn't receive invitations.

Several nights before the dance, I was finishing dinner, psyching up to tackle my biology homework. The phone rang, and I answered.

"Is this Maria?" a woman's voice demanded.

"Yes," I said.

"You are a filthy, spoiled little brat," she said. "You should be ashamed. Thanks to you and your pathetic dance, my daughter and two other girls are sitting over here, sobbing their hearts out. You're a little whore. If I was your mother, I would beat you purple until you couldn't breathe."

The line went dead. I hung up and burst into tears.

That same year, my sister and I were involved in the Pizza Hut-sponsored *Book-It!* program. Students who read a certain number of books in a month received a free personal-pan pizza. My sister and I, avid readers even without free food involved, received a coupon every month. For a family existing well below the poverty line, these coupons were the highlight of our fine-dining experience. One Sunday a month, after church, my mother, sister, and I would go to Pizza Hut in our nice clothes and be served by the pretty waitresses with slick red shirts and permed hair. I always picked pepperoni; my sister always chose cheese. Sometimes, when my mom stole change from my father's underwear drawer, we could split a Coke. When the waitress asked for my

mom's order, she would always say the same thing: "I've already eaten, thank you. It's just a treat for the girls."

She would sip on her water with an empty stomach and never ask us for a bite.

After my slip on the ice, the pain was unbearable. I started to get headaches, my shoulders were always sore, and I walked on my toes. I would describe my pain to friends and family, but no one seemed to know what to do. I searched online for information on "tailbone pain" and found a coccyx support group at [www.coccyx.org](http://www.coccyx.org). "The pain isn't in your head," the webpage assured me. "You aren't going crazy."

I learned about my coccyx: the final portion of the vertebral column, made up of three-to-five segments. Many anatomists believe that the coccyx is the remnant of a vestigial tail. It acts as a shock absorber when a person sits down. The term comes from the Greek word *kokkyx*, which means "cuckoo's beak" because of its shape. (If I'm going to have chronic pain, I'm glad it involves a word fun to write and even more fun to say.)

Most notably, I learned that childbirth and falling are the two primary causes of coccydynia, and because the wider female pelvis leaves the coccyx more exposed, women are five times more likely to injure their coccyx than men. Armed with this knowledge and an online support group that includes members from Sweden, I made an appointment with my doctor.

The x-ray showed that my coccyx wasn't fractured, and even if it had been, there wasn't much the doctor could have done. You can't exactly put your tailbone in a cast. She prescribed muscle relaxers and sent me on my way. I saw my massage therapist, who was able temporarily to relieve the pain, but acknowledged that a more intense

treatment would be necessary to alleviate the problem. “You need to do internal massage,” she said. “Sometime, when you are relaxed and in the shower or have some lubricant, stick your finger in your anus and gently put pressure on it from the inside.”

I decided the pain wasn't *that* bad and made an appointment with the chiropractor. He was able to reduce my headaches, and after a few weeks of seeing both him and the massage therapist (for the good-old-fashioned *external* massage), the pain retreated into a dull, infrequent ache that I sometimes forgot was there.

Occasionally, when I'm especially stressed and tense, or when I sit in a car for too long, my tailbone will throb, and I will have to shift around, stretch out, and schedule an appointment with the chiropractor. But mainly, these days, I happily take sitting for granted. When I watch the boys run around our home, awe and fear simultaneously strike me. I am in awe that their little bodies, the same helpless bodies I saw lying in the warmer at the hospital, grow stronger and more able each day. Sometimes I can't believe that they've made it this far. But then the fear takes over--fear because they still have a long way to go, fear that I won't always be able to protect them from a slip on the ice, or something worse. Now I understand why my mother sat there with an empty stomach to watch my sister and me enjoy our pizza. Now I understand the rage behind that anonymous phone call. I know now what it is like to have the mother-bear instinct: I would attempt to rip off someone's head with my bare hands in a *second* if that person were to hurt my child in any way.

What components constitute “maternal instinct”? To what degree are they innate? Before I became a mother, I was under the impression that the selflessness, the love, the

protectiveness were entirely innate, a theory I now see misleads many a new mom when she finds out it's not necessarily true. When a close friend of mine brought her newborn home, she called me one night in a panic. "I don't know if I love her like I'm supposed to," she said. "I don't have that feeling all of the books talk about, that feeling that I would give my life for her or that I loved her the moment she came out."

Something sounded familiar in her voice: dread, guilt, regret. The type of thing that follows the phrase "supposed to" and robs us of the maternal experience as it is.

A few nights ago, Taj woke up crying after everyone else had gone to sleep. I brought him into our bed and watched him in the moonlight as he resettled—it's much easier to bask in a child's presence during a break from his demands of the day. I finally turned away from him, onto my side, and pulled the blanket over all of us, letting the peacefulness of our lair carry my thoughts between reality and dreams.

Suddenly, in his sleep, Taj's body jerked. With a swift, hard movement, he kicked me directly in the coccyx, causing pain to shoot up my spine so hard that I rolled out of bed, onto my knees. He made the appropriate adjustment and snuggled in next to his father, still fast asleep.

The first time I sacrificed this segment of my vertebral column for my son, I didn't have a choice. By the time I slipped on the ice, I did, and chose to take the fall. This time around, whether the injury was a result of an active decision on my part seemed a moot point. I retreated to the couch with my pillow, thinking, tomorrow I can always reach for a latex glove and some Vaseline.

What matters most now is that when Taj whispers to me his usual good night chant, "I love you, you're my best friend, and I'm never going to change my mind," I

whisper the same thing back, and know with confidence that what I say has come to be true.

## Short: On Peeking Through Fences

At the end of a cul-de-sac in a sub-development of Stillwater, Oklahoma, sits a distinguished cream-colored home, complete with white columns and a welcoming front porch. The neighborhood is immaculate. The streets are smooth, the yards are trimmed, and the perimeter of each brick home is softened with mulch and baby plants. It is mid-October and the mornings are cool, but the roses are in full bloom. Every landscape contains at least one rose bush, with petals in shades that range from red to pale pink. The rose is Oklahoma's state flower, one fact I never knew I'd know. Of course, it's common knowledge that roses are used as symbols, for love or peace. But it's less well-known that what people refer to as "thorns" on a rose are technically "prickles"—they help the plant attach to others as it grows. Another lesser-known fact: the ancient Roman custom of placing a rose on the door of a room where secret or confidential matters are discussed produced the phrase *sub rosa*, or "under the rose," a way to indicate something is private.

The air is quiet and still, but on this block there are a few signs pointing to the presence of children. If one waits long enough, she might see the door of a three-car garage open up to swallow a mini-van or suburban. Through a gap in the tall wooden fence one might peek into a backyard to see a private swing-set that puts the local school playground to shame. Despite these indications, though, the neighborhood remains mostly empty and the people living side-by-side remain mostly strangers.

There are visitors in the cream-colored house at the end of the cul-de-sac. I am one of them, along with Chris, Luke, and Taj. The home belongs to Chris's parents, who are also now my parents. In addition to us, Chris's grandparents are staying. After the bustle of a morning routine that includes coffee and news, most of the people in the

cream-colored home take off for work, leaving the twins, the grandfather, the grandmother, and me.

Because they live on the East coast, we don't see this set of grandparents often. They are Chris's adopted father's parents, which, in any other world, would make them complete strangers to me, but now they are my grandparents, too. They're visiting in order to give my grandmother a break from her normal routine back home in New Hampshire, caring for her husband. As is tradition out East, this family doesn't open up about personal matters, so I have not been told much about Grandpa's condition, other than that he suffers from Alzheimer's.

If becoming a mother has taught me anything about myself, it's that I am not naturally a selfless person. After understanding to a fuller extent what it means to live my life at the whim of someone else's needs, I am shocked that people exist as caregivers on a day-to-day basis without demanding some sort of official recognition or reward. And they've been doing it for years.

I watch Grandma walk her husband to the table. He seems to have forgotten how to move, as she encourages him to put one foot in front of the other and to bend his knees to sit. She is upbeat and matter-of-fact. He is silent. His eyes widen when he sees me, as though he wonders who I am, but he doesn't ask.

We eat together, the grandmother, grandfather, twins, and me. Grandma and I talk gently, about gentle things. In my heart, though, I'm maniacal: wild and loud. I want to lay my head on my new grandmother's lap and sob, let her stroke my hair, and tell me that it gets easier. That I won't always feel like the walls are closing in on me. The one

day, I will breathe deeply again. But her eyes are just a little too faint, a little too hard, a little too weary. And so, I smile and offer to pour more coffee.

After breakfast, I wash a load of the boys' laundry. Blankies, undies, pants, socks. Before I can continue my job, I must transfer the contents of the dryer, left by my grandmother. She has done a load for her husband, a load of laundry containing the same items, only in bigger sizes. I fold them and put them on top of the dryer. It's the least I can do.

The Summer of Why  
(In Vignettes)

*Certain things they should stay the way they are.  
You ought to be able to stick them in one of those  
big glass cases and just leave them alone.  
I know that's impossible, but it's too bad anyway.*

--Holden Caulfield, from JD Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*

It's the summer before everything changes, just when we were getting used to the way things are. It's the summer the twins, Taj and Luke, are four and by summer's end they will have a little sister. Just when I am finally getting this thing down, being a mother to these boys so young and dependant, they are moving away from me. This is the last summer they still technically fit into the category of "toddler," the last summer I can buy their clothes from the baby store downtown, the last summer I can take them to the little wading pool in the city park without lying about their age. When I rub their smooth, slender backs, my hands run over what Anne Lamott calls "sharp angel shoulder blades."

I am getting big. I'm due in August. August: it's a month I don't know what to make of. The month that everything ends and everything else begins. Raised by a teacher and perpetually a student, I hold August as my January and always will, long after I receive the last of my degrees. Even if I don't end up teaching, like my mother, I will never let go of the expectation that August brings in a new year. When we considered this pregnancy, Chris and I originally thought a May baby would be best, so that I could have the summer to recover and continue my graduate teaching assistantship in the fall. We got a little lazy with the timing, realized the baby was coming at the end of summer, and I was afraid we botched our plans once again. But one thing I should know by now is

that clutching onto some sense of control keeps my hands from holding what's in front of me.

Of course I realize the timing is meant to be: I have one last summer to give my full attention to these boys, who, from the moment they were ready to enter this world, have always had to wait their turn. They go to a preschool on campus during the year, while I am student and a teacher, and I want to give them more time at home. I don't want future regrets of missing what Adrienne Rich recalls of her own boys when they were young; "each child's individual body, his slenderness, wiriness, softness, grace, the beauty of little boys who have not been taught that the male body must be rigid."

We have months of empty days ahead of us. I'm nervous about being alone with them. As much as it is my intention to be, I am not someone who ever has much of a plan. I wonder what we will do all day. I wonder what I will give them for lunch. I wonder if they will get bored.

Instead, we progress naturally into a luxurious routine of leisure and whim. With no places to be, no set mealtimes, no dress code, we do what we want. The boys sleep together on the floor in front of a box fan; they wake and rush out in underwear to dig in the sandbox; we snack on cut fruit and popcorn whenever we like; we nap together in my bed; we stop at parks and they gather acorns while I doze on a blanket in the sun.

\*

It's July. Around noon one day, we are eating at a burrito joint downtown. A woman sits a few tables down, gulping a beer. I notice her first; her unwashed, matted hair sticks out in all directions and she murmurs loudly to herself. I see the empty bottles

scattered on the table, but no trace of food. Her clothes are baggy, with holes in the sweatshirt she is wearing, despite the heat. I wonder for a minute, then turn my back.

When we finish lunch, Taj says he has to pee. As we walk the narrow hall, the woman emerges from the restroom. She drags one foot behind her when she walks, causing her body to lurch forward, one half of it lifting higher than the other with each step.

We pass. The boys stare.

“Why do you walk funny?” Taj asks, his penny brown eyes and long lashes turned toward her.

She mumbles something incoherent, but I can sense he has made her angry. He continues on and seems to have forgotten about it the moment she staggers away.

The three of us go into the bathroom. I fidget. Do I make clear to Taj that his question was inappropriate? That it could hurt someone’s feelings? Do I understand “why?” well enough myself to explain when he ask the inevitable question? Do I really need to do it *now*, when the encounter with the woman was probably a fluke thing that won’t happen again in the near future?

Partly, I’m tired. It’s July in Kansas and I’m nine months pregnant. Partly, I’m feeling a little lazy. I’ve been asked the default question “why?” so much this summer that finally, a few days earlier in the car, I told the boys I needed a break from the word for five whole minutes.

“Why?” they asked.

Mostly, I want my toddlers to stay toddlers and I’m afraid that explaining the idiosyncrasies of communal etiquette will begin the stripping of their childhood naiveté,

an innocence I don't want them to lose. Taj asked the woman a question plenty of people have probably wanted to ask her; he meant no harm by his curiosity. I knew this.

But I'm his mother.

So I decide *no* in the restroom. *No* to all of my nagging questions. Now was not the time to explain the protective social protocol in this situation. He is so young still. So curious. I want him to stay that way.

We leave the restroom and the boys skip ahead of me, as four-year-old twins are prone to do. I am waddling my fastest to catch up, but I am awkward and slow.

Taj immediately spots the woman at her table and runs up to her. My stomach tightens suddenly, as if it can predict before my brain what is about to unfold. She is on a new beer by now, and her eyes dart around wildly.

"Why do you walk funny?" he asks again.

Most of the people in the restaurant hear her yelling, but the words are not clear. I make out "moron," "rude," and "fucking idiot" and watch the people watching me, the pregnant woman who can't control her child who is now being yelled at by a crazy lady drinking Corona.

"Taj! Come on!" I whisper loudly. I finally catch up to him and take him by the arm.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, barely audible, as we go.

We stop right outside the restaurant. I am gasping for breath and trying to piece together the scene that has just occurred to understand where to place my overwhelming anger and sadness. It hadn't occurred to me that if I don't explain things, someone else will.

Taj's face is blank and I wonder if he is unaffected, if he didn't even really understand what just happened. He never hears those words; maybe he doesn't understand how upset the woman was.

"What happened, Taj? What did the lady say to you?" I fake steady and neutral, trying hard not to project my emotions onto him.

His tan, flushed face begins to lose color and his lips twist in pain. He shuts his eyes and begins to wail.

"She was mean to me!" he sobs. Now he is having difficulty breathing and I begin to shiver, despite the sweat running down my temples.

I imagine myself, an actress playing me, storming back into the restaurant and grabbing the woman by her hair, pulling her out of her seat, and shaking her. "Who do you think you are?" I yell. "He's only four years old!"

But as soon as my imagination lands, I realize there is no talking to the woman. I know my anger is irrational and misplaced. I do the "should" and try to put myself in her shoes. How clumsy this world is, to have us all bumbling around. How lucky I am, for reasons I have no control over. How little my boys understand: they have so much to learn.

Luke, always protective of his brother, begins to cry.

"Mommy," he asks. "Is it okay if we are *not* the mean lady's friend?"

Usually I say no to this type of question, but today, I say yes. And then I put on my sunglasses so my four-year-old boys cannot see that I am crying too.

\*

When the boys fall asleep for the night, I re-read my favorite books—an indulgence fitting for pregnancy. J. D. Salinger is always compelling. To the delight of teenagers (and horror of censors) everywhere, Holden Caulfield bewails the “Fuck you” graffiti he is always running into. “It’s hopeless, anyway,” he says. “If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn’t rub out even half the ‘Fuck you’ signs in the world.”

In particular, Holden hates that children would see it and how “they’d wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them—all cockeyed, naturally—what it meant, and how they’d all think about it and maybe even worry about it.” More than ever before, I want to join him in the field of rye, at the edge, and catch the children before they fall off the cliff.

I’ve become disgusted with the social world and everything it wants to teach my children. They are, after all, my babies. “I’m the one who remembers their slick hot entrance, their folded bones,” writes Kate Moses. In her own baby boy, Lamott envies his lack of self-awareness. Of his abundant energy, she explains, “He hasn’t had to start channeling it into managing the world and everybody’s emotions around him.” Social psychologist George Herbert Mead offered an analysis of self-awareness; that it has a social origin, developed through interactions that teach us to take the perspectives of other persons on ourselves.

I think of how, as babies, the boys used to be thrilled just to wake in the morning. Chris and I had human alarm clocks that roused us with squeals and laughter. They don’t laugh so easily in the mornings, anymore.

\*

It's August. Baby Girl is here. During one of her first nights in this world, as she sleeps next to Chris and me, our bedroom door creaks open. Luke has had a bad dream. The boys have bad dreams about the same couple things: Bad Guys (burglars from *Walter the Farting Dog*, who break into our house and steal toys because they don't have any of their own), Diesel 10 (a scary train with a claw), and Captain Hook (even though they have never actually seen *Peter Pan*).

Usually, we don't let the boys sleep in our bed, but these days I've been afraid that having Baby Girl will obstruct my love for the twins. I'm afraid I won't have room in "the nest of my heart," as Moses calls it, for my boys to share "the type of passionate, consuming, distilled essence of love that one feels for a baby." After Moses brings home her second child, she writes of listening to her son chatter, "I often felt the urge to gather him up and beg, 'Don't go!' though I knew that I was the one who was going."

In an attempt to counterbalance these fears (which haven't actually materialized), I let Luke stay. Having a newborn in the house suddenly makes 4-year-olds seem like teenagers. I can't believe how clumsy they are, how big their hands look now. It is still technically summer, but it's a new kind of summer, one in which Baby Girl exists. At some recent-but-undetermined time, the twins turned from still-fitting-in-the-toddler-category to full blown boys. There is nothing toddling about them. Maybe it happened the morning we drove home from the birthing center and had to move the toddler seats in the mini-van to make room for a smaller car seat that held a 7lb. 3oz. baby girl. Whenever it was, something is different. The boys are oblivious to the change. But I am not.

I feel like a proper queen in my king-sized bed, with Chris and Luke and Baby Girl. They are all sleeping, but as I survey the peaceful profiles, it is Luke's who makes me gasp. With his eyes shut and his mouth relaxed, he suddenly looks like a stranger to me. I think I can see the 12-year-old boy he will be and the 16-year-old after that, with wavy blond hair and freckles sprinkled on his nose like brown sugar. I see some of Chris in him: strong jaw, full lips. Even though it was me he resembled at birth, I can't find a trace of myself anywhere. I have to fight the urge to wake him up, this stranger, so that I can see my little boy's eyes

\*

*"It's a boy!" someone said in that dim, dreamy, everlasting moment when he came free of me for the first time, and I thought: I knew it. A day later, he and I dozed together on the same bed where I'd given birth and he became Baby. Later I discovered that Boy was something wonderful, too.*

*I have been shocked by boys—shocked each time by the suddenness with which childhood ended and teenage began in their young, childish bodies. Shoes were too small, bicycles too small, dinner portions too small, backpacks too small, dreams too small—and the world too big.*

*Sing for Huck Finn, for Pinocchio, for Peter Pan and the Lost Boys, sing along: "I won't grow up." Sing about the Greek athletes running endlessly on the broken urns, made beautiful by capricious gods. Sing about the eternity of youth, which doesn't last forever.*

Sallie Tisdale, *Boy Crazy*

\*

Summer is over. It's the night before Halloween. I am struggling with a ghost and a witch to get their costumes right. Taj is standing on the bench, wearing a white sheet that is too long. I cut it around the bottom and ask him to walk.

"I'm a beautiful beauty," he says, not interested in scaring us, but instead holding the sheet out like a gown and twirling around.

"I'm a princess!" cries Luke, in his witch's cape, like the long dresses he sees on his classmates but never gets to wear.

"When do we get to put on the make-up!?"

Baby Girl is drooling in her bouncy seat on the table.

"Do you think we should tell Luke that witches are usually girls?" Chris asks.

"Do you think we should tell Taj not to pretend he's wearing a dress?"

I watch my ghost and my witch spin around the kitchen floor, seeing themselves as beautiful as I see them. I am painfully, achingly aware that as I am enjoying this moment, it is gone.

"No way," I reply.

The next day we take them to school for their Halloween party. Every single girl in their class is dressed as some sort of princess. Chiffon, lace, ruffles. The girls take turns trying on the tiaras and crowns.

"Can I try?" Taj asks, reaching his hand out for a gold one adorned with emerald and ruby.

His classmate snatches the tiara. "These are only for girls!" she laughs and hands it to her friend.

Taj watches for a moment and then turns to something else and I can't believe how devastated I am that he doesn't ask her why.

## Short: On Differences I Don't Want To Believe In

The textbooks describe her as an “angel” baby, the kind I’ve heard about but never believed exists. She rarely cries; she is sweet-natured, calm, and looks out the window as if she’s always known the world. When I gave birth, there was a moment, in between pushes, when her head emerged and the rest of her was inside me. In an instant, the peace that fell over the room was audible. I could hear it. The people attending me gasped.

“What’s happened?” I whispered.

She had opened her eyes.

“Girls are easier than boys when they’re young,” people have told us. “Then it changes when they’re teenagers.”

Chris and I try not to buy into all that gender stuff, but for now Sola is proving those generalizations to be true. The difference between one girl and two boys has blown our minds.

Chris finally admitted the other night that it’s complicated for him, having a little girl. My friend, Katie, and I had lined up our newborns on the couch for a picture. Sola was sitting next to Katie’s son when Chris walked in. He was visibly uncomfortable and hid in the kitchen.

“I felt helpless, suddenly,” he said later, “seeing her next to Miles. It didn’t matter that he’s a baby with no teeth. I just saw into the future when she would be sitting next to another boy who would take her away from me, after all of these years of protecting her and caring for her, and he won’t understand any of it. He won’t care for her like I do.”

I know what he means, in a way. I heard a story the other day on the local radio station about a girl, a 7-year-old, whose body was found in the woods near her house. She disappeared as she walked home from a friend's. I thought about the plastic Tupperware I just replaced with glass so we wouldn't have chemicals leaching into our food. I thought about breastfeeding, about how I will keep it up for the recommended year, even though I don't like it much. I thought about the supportive, yet flexible shoes we buy the children, the car seats we strap them into, the extra we pay for organic milk and free-range, grass-fed beef.

And how, walking home from a friend's house one day, none of those things matter.

Katie and I asked Chris why it's different with a little girl. Why isn't it the same with boys?

"It just is," he said. "Girls need to be protected."

We didn't like his answer; it's not one I hear many people say. Girls need to be protected? What decade is this? But I remembered the story about the 7-year-old and thought, even though I don't want to admit it, maybe he's right.

### iii. epidermis

**corporal** \kɒr-p(ə-)rəl\ *adj.* of, relating to, or affecting the body;  
bodily

## In Touch

*We touch heaven when we lay our hands on a human body.*  
--Novalis

I am a cutaneous stimulant reciprocator. That is to say, a snugglebug.

Satisfying my need to nestle was no problem back when it was only my husband and me, tangled together in our full-size bed.

However, now there are four of us. We keep saying that the time has come to upgrade to a queen, or even a king on the days we are feeling entitled. When the subject of co-sleeping comes up among parents, we don't have to defend our decision not to include our toddler twins for slumber in our bed: all we have to say is, "we only have a full-size," and no one asks any questions.

Even though we don't sleep with the boys, we all pile together in the little bed for bedtime stories. The twins are fraternal, and they couldn't be more different, right down to the touch. Taj, with dark eyes and hair, and olive skin, has Chris's touch. It is calm and inviting. It is like warm butter. Luke, blond and fair, has what I imagine my own touch must feel like to others. It is energetic and ethereal, like the flutter of a bird's wing.

We all rub off on one another. When Chris and the boys and I lie together, I realize I can't tell where my skin ends and theirs begins. We are all usually quite bare, our legs and feet and arms all wrapped up together, and everyone's skin feels like my own. We must resemble members of the Kaingang tribe of Brazil, who, as anthropologist Jules Henry observed, "lie cheek by jowl, arms around one another, legs slung across bodies, for all the world like lovers in our own society."

It isn't a matter of adult-style cuddling, the organized and rhythmic kind Chris and I have perfected; it has, instead, been taken over and reformed by the twins. Our

twins do not hug us in the traditional way. Their style is whack! Fists fly up and hit you in the eye as they writhe and wriggle to find a position that allows them to sling one arm across your belly and rub a leg or foot on your thigh and still be able to point at the big green tractor on the page in front of you and whack! That position wasn't quite right, so let's start it all over again. Now that is a toddler-snuggle. I'll take it any way I can get it.

My sister is the first person I remember touching who had an aura hovering over her skin. Her hands weren't just soft: they pulsed with tranquil energy. Her touch not only made me feel calm and relaxed; I also felt a sense of peace one finds when one is at home.

When my sister and I were little, we'd invite each other to "spend the night." The closeness of sharing a room wasn't enough; one of us would leave her bed and climb under the covers with the other. Those nights we two snuggled in bed, it didn't seem like enough for me to hold onto her tightly. I wanted somehow to consume her; I remember wanting to bite her cheek or squeeze her arm so hard I might break it. I felt a desire for the possession of her skin in such a way that thoughts of envy for her touch were only held at bay by remembering that, at least, she was my sister. At least I could experience this magic she had.

Of all of our senses, touch seems to be paramount to our survival and well-being. Anatomist Ashley Montagu devoted his life to understanding touch and its mediator, the skin. In his landmark book, *Touching*, published in 1971, Montagu writes, "The skin, the flexible continuous caparison of our bodies, like a cloak, covers us all. It is the oldest and

the most sensitive of our organs, our first medium of communication, and our most efficient protector.”

What initially sparked Montagu’s interest was a seemingly unconnected study done in 1922 involving rats that brought attention to the physical, physiological, and psychological influences of our skin, the largest of our sensory organs, and the first to develop in utero. As a child, I heard stories of orphans who were left in sterile hospitals where no one touched them. These were the babies who turned into serial killers and madmen, I was told. I thought to myself, “Who are these little babies, and why doesn’t someone hold them?” What seems to be common sense now, that early cutaneous stimulation is crucial to the development of mammals, was not so just a century ago. The rats were being tested for an experiment involving the thyroid. Serendipitously, the anatomist conducting the experiment learned that the rats with highest survival rates were those handled most frequently and lovingly by humans. The rats that did not survive were those that had little physical contact, no more than routine feeding and cage-cleaning. This experiment influenced doctors and scientists to take a closer look at touch and its effect on human development.

“Your epidermis is showing!”

This was my favorite joke as a fifth-grader, yelling it to some poor, ignorant soul who would inevitably check his fly or her skirt. Finally, I would let them in on my impressive vocabulary: “ ‘Epidermis’ means skin! Your skin is showing!”

Of course, the epidermis is, in fact, only part of the skin: the most immediate part, the part exposed to the environment, housing the human body's tactile system. And what

a system it is: “A piece of skin the size of a quarter,” Montagu writes, “contains more than 3 million cells, 100 to 340 sweat glands, 50 nerve endings, and 3 feet of blood vessels.” The skin, he explains, is the exposed portion of the nervous system, an organ that, next to the brain, is the most important of all of our systems. As a general rule, the earlier a function develops in utero, the more important it is likely to be. Consider, then, that, “At nine fetal weeks, when the palm [of the embryo] is touched the fingers will bend as if to grip; at twelve weeks, the fingers and thumb will close.”

When Luke was born, I wasn't able to hold him to my chest for more than a few minutes. As much as I wanted a long period of skin-to-skin contact with my firstborn, I had to pass him to my husband, who passed him to a nurse as we prepared for the arrival of his younger brother. While I was delivering Taj, a nurse told us that Luke was not reaching a stable temperature. It was not an emergency, but something that would need to be monitored.

As soon as I delivered Taj, my husband placed him next to his brother, the fluids from birth still covering his five-pound, six-ounce body. At that moment, the two made awkward movements towards each other like two blind puppies wriggling for warmth. We have a picture of them clasping shiny, wet hands together, each face turned in the direction of the brother he can't quite see but can feel. Once his younger brother was placed next to him, Luke's temperature immediately rose to its proper degree and stayed there with no more aberrations.

As it happened, Luke needed his strength for his brother. The next day Taj's blood-sugar level dropped quickly, and his small size made breastfeeding almost impossible. I found myself in a new-mother catch-22: my baby needed to eat to raise his

blood-sugar level, but his blood-sugar level was so low that he did not have the strength to eat. Having been determined not to let anything pass his lips other than the colostrum from my breast, I watched in tears as the nurse attempted to feed him some sugar-water from the smallest bottle I have ever seen. It didn't work. But when we placed Luke by his side under a blanket, their skin touching, Taj began to stir and waken with new life-force running through his frail body.

This tale of healing touch is not unusual for twins. Many people remember the picture of the “Rescuing Hug” photo, published in *Life* and *Reader's Digest* in 1995. Two premature baby girls lay facing each other, so small they are swimming in their little diapers. Several plastic tubes are connected to their bodies, and one of the girls has her arm around the other. These tiny newborns were close to the two-pound mark, one struggling with a variety of problems, from breathing interruptions to heart-rate difficulties. Against hospital regulations, a nurse suggested putting the twins in the same incubator. Once they were placed together, the weaker sister's breathing regulated to her twin's pace, her blood oxygen levels improved, and her heart-rate strengthened.

When I was seventeen, my mother delivered the news that my adolescent daydream of being a mysterious, plucky orphan was (somewhat) true: I had a different father from the one I had known, and my biological father was alive and well and, it turned out, pretty cool. Our meeting opened a reservoir of questions that had accumulated during my childhood. Why am I such an extrovert? Where did I get my desire to write? How did I get such an angular nose? Meeting him set in motion the difficult, liberating process of understanding and accepting who I am.

However, one revelation I had from that day forward still haunts me: my beloved sister and I are not complete; she is my half-sister, she is not my whole.

Consider the list of definitions found under whole:

adj.

1. not damaged or broken
2. not wounded, impaired, or incapacitated
3. healed or restored to health physically or psychologically
4. having both parents in common with your siblings

If these definitions apply to people just as they do to objects, and I am not, in fact, whole, what kind of person am I? I do not have both parents in common with anyone. Is the correlation, then, that I am somehow damaged or broken? What about impaired? Am I not healed or psychologically healthy? What kind of relationship is it that I have with my sister? How would it be different if we shared those twenty-three little extra strands of DNA?

When I asked my sister recently if she ever felt discouraged by our lack of “wholeness” as a family, she said, “No. What we lack in common DNA, we must have made up for by touch.”

Perfect. Her answer is exactly what I’m looking for. In fact, it is better than anything I could come up with. There is only one problem. I don’t believe her. If she is right, then I wouldn’t be envious of the indescribable bond I’ve witnessed in whole siblings. I can’t deny that, despite those childhood cuddle-sessions, there is an implicit tension between my sister and me as we’ve struggled to understand each other through the years.

It’s as if the reaction from other people, upon learning she and I call each other “sister,” reinforces my regrets that we can never be as close as I imagine two sisters

could. Not only do we share few of the same physical traits, but our personalities and dispositions couldn't be more different. I instinctively pick up on the surprise a new acquaintance struggles to hide and explain, "Well, we actually have different fathers."

"Ahhh....the inquirer will say. "That makes much more sense."

Despite my better side prompting me that none of this DNA stuff matters, that touch reconciles any genetic discrepancies, there is still a part of me relieved to have twins. I envy the bond that my sons will have (in fact, already have) due to their similar genetic make-up and closeness of age. Because of the complicated journey I have been through to understand my own biological relationship with my parents and siblings, I take comfort in knowing the twins' simultaneous conception results in an unadulterated relationship with one another. There will be no secrets, DNA tests, or complicated holidays. No need to overcompensate through touch.

What is it that draws me to the skin of my husband and offspring like a craving or addiction? Montagu reminds us that touch is a verb, but, "its sensory elements induce those neural, glandular, muscular, and mental changes which in combination we call an emotion. Hence touch is not experienced as a simple physical modality, as sensation, but affectively, as emotion."

Ah, yes: emotion. I'm no psychologist, but I've been to enough therapy to know that my lack of wholeness growing up may be manifesting itself now through the tactile communication with my family.

These nights in our full-size bed, I can feel the epidermises of the four of us running together like a circle. It's mainly a matter of procrastination that my husband and

I have no choice but to brush skin when we sleep. But it's almost time for Chris and me to get a new bed, one that will hold the four of us for bedtime stories, and the boys will inherit our current one. Soon enough, the twins will be an age that our culture deems unacceptable for boys to share a bed. Until then, though, I hope they hold onto each other extra tight, cuddled up, sharing the warmth.

## Being the Girl, Bearing the Girl

*If when you're young you only knew,  
if when you're older you still could.*

--Henri Estienne

Just to be clear, I don't actually *know* if I'm having a boy or girl this time. I'm in the third trimester of my second pregnancy and my hunches won't be confirmed until she comes out. My husband, Chris, and I are not big planners and he's convinced it will be much more exciting to make the "It's a boy!" or "It's a girl!" phone calls the old fashioned way: after the baby is born. He thinks maybe it will help me during labor and delivery, to have the surprise waiting at the end. I'm rather neutral on the matter, though if memory serves, when I delivered the twins my vagina exploded at least twice, and I didn't care if I was about to give birth to three-legged androgynous centaurs: I just wanted the things out.

My instincts tell me this time, after already having twin boys, I am having a girl. I'm not sure if this is technically "motherly instinct," as the reasoning is completely selfish, superficial, and based in fear, but I'm calling it an instinct nonetheless. Everyone around me loves to make predictions, as people do, and most guess that it's a girl. My friends and family assume I want a girl, as I have the boys already. But I'm not so sure the assumption works here. Lately I've become quite afraid and apprehensive that this mysterious being inside me, who seems to have eight feet, is a girl and as I uncover why, I am only humbled and ashamed.

When I was younger and pictured myself a mother, it never occurred to me that I wouldn't have a girl. She would be like me: a mini-me, only better. The improvements were superficial. In "The Breakfast Club" of life, I have always been Molly Ringwald's character: "the pretty one," a classification that only encouraged me to obsess over my

flaws. A daughter would be the channel for me to be perfect in all the ways I thought I wasn't. She would have straighter teeth and longer legs. She would be smarter, funnier, more confident. She would be able to do a back-handspring, play the piano beautifully without having to practice, and be the obvious choice for the lead in William Inge's *Bus Stop*, the school play.

Ahem.

Now that I am grounded in the reality of offspring—that birth is the child's first step in the long quest for autonomy, that even two conceived at the same time can be so dramatically different from one another, from their parents, with their own wills that aren't always in compliance with mine—I realize my adolescent musings were naïve and narcissistic.

This pregnancy is so physically different than the last that I wonder how they both occurred in the same body. When I was pregnant with the twins, I wasn't sick at all; this time around, I amble hesitantly with the subtle undercurrent that I may throw-up at any moment. With the twins, I worked a full-time retail management position, on my feet, until the very end; now, I lie down for hours after the two half-days a week that I teach. I've gained as much weight halfway through this pregnancy with a singleton as I did at the end of my pregnancy with twins. The extra weight I put on the first time made me feel voluptuous and sexy; I wore a bikini and was in no hurry to retire my senior yearbook status as "biggest flirt." This time I have cellulite from my neck to my ankles; I dread wearing shorts and have trouble looking men in the eye at the grocery store.

I have all kinds of rationalizations to explain these differences. I tell myself that my body's only physical memory of pregnancy is gestating twins; the only way it knows

to prepare is to pack on the pounds, right from conception. Perhaps the four years that have passed since my first pregnancy really *have* made a difference in my metabolism, despite the chuckles I get from women older than me when I propose this theory and then admit I'm not yet 30. (Though I'm beginning to think numbers are a technicality: I feel like I've aged exponentially since becoming a mom.) However, none of my rationalizations explain what has happened to me psychologically, mentally, in reaction to my physical changes.

I have become a full-blown hypocrite, and a shallow and insecure one at that. My first (admittedly unsolicited) advice to pregnant friends used to be "listen to your body." This was what I thought I learned from my first pregnancy. I didn't find out until 32 weeks along that I was carrying twins and was relieved that I gave into my hunger, cravings, and fatigue so early in the pregnancy to gain the weight I needed for the healthy babies I delivered. I was angry at the charts and tables in all the pregnancy manuals that made me feel guilty for gaining too much weight too early, something that I now know is normal, healthy, and necessary for carrying twins. From this experience I decided I would listen to my body over the books and encouraged others to do the same.

Now, though, I'm beginning to regret the frequency with which I ingest calories the moment I feel a bit wobbly, especially during that first trimester. Did I really need to stop at the drive-thru for a value-meal 20 minutes before Christmas dinner? When I was carrying twins and began my first pregnancy under-weight, I would have said, *Yes and can I sub a milkshake for an extra 49 cents?* But this time, carrying one and weighing in the "normal" range? Maybe not.

On top of “listen to your body,” I preached “love your body,” after my empowering experiences of a natural childbirth and breastfeeding. I was (and still am) filled with awe at the sheer force of my body. It was after giving birth that I realized what a breeze participating in a triathlon would be in comparison and completed at least half a dozen before the boys turned three. All of the feats that served as defining chapters in my physical history before—mountain biking, scuba diving, bungee jumping—seemed like minor details after giving birth. So, for a while there anyway, I like to think I really believed it when I told other women that our physical imperfections don’t matter when it’s time to do what only *we* can do: bring another life into this world.

But. Somewhere between then and now, I must have gotten comfortable and even proud of the ways my body re-settled into itself, and now it’s expanding at a pace with which I’m not entirely comfortable. I suppose I’m not loving my body.

To combat the weight gain, I’m getting more active: swimming, leisurely bike rides with the boys, and long walks on the levee behind our house, an elevated gravel trail that wraps around the Kansas farmland for miles. I used to do my triathlon and marathon training on this trail, running for hours in the summer heat, wearing just a sports bra and shorts, with legs that might not be perfect, but damn they were strong. Hardly wearing a thing, trotting for miles, I felt like I was part of the elements: the blazing sun, bursts of prairie winds, the swirls of dust I kicked up with every step. How free we all were together!

Lately though, in this pregnancy, I’ve become aware of how unnatural the ground feels under my feet. The heat from the sun feels cruel, and the wind stings my face and causes my eyes to tear. I walk slowly and clumsily, in long pants, granny bra, and

oversized shirt, lumbering into the wooded area beside the trail every fifteen minutes to pee.

It was during one of these solitary walks that it occurred to me. *I'm having a girl. And she is replacing me.* I felt that this difficult pregnancy, these physical changes in my body that I fear will be irreversible, these feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, are the sacrifice I'm making to bring another female into the world. It suddenly made sense, at least symbolically, that the boys didn't require the same type of surrender a girl would.

I didn't lose any sense of my sexuality after becoming a mother to boys. In some ways, I felt more sexually powerful. I made jokes that our household was being overtaken by penises, but I'm starting to think maybe I liked the idea that I was the sole protector and provider of femininity in our home. I realize this after hearing my friend Kate's theory that mothers of boys have a harder time sharing their lives, homes, and sons with other women. As over-simplistic and trite as I want to believe this sounds, I know it is true for me. I have imagined times in the future when my sons bring home dates, girlfriends, fiancés, wives, and I will have to stand in my middle-age skin and take in the youth, beauty, and bubbling sexuality that used to be me. Just as I have been the young girlfriend at the lake, wearing a bikini and drinking wine in the sun, I will have to sit back in the shade, wearing a cover-up and straw hat, as not to damage my aging skin, and watch someone who used to be me, smelling like coconut and laughing on the dock.

Though I've peered ahead at these future scenes, I've found comfort in knowing they are still in the distance. The thought that I'm carrying a daughter, however, makes my vanity more desperate. In her recent review of a father's memoir, Caitlin Flannigan writes, "...in his daughter a father discovers a person whose very bloodline ensures that

she will be charming to him: at the precise moment that his wife is fading into middle age, her beauty resurges in the daughter—there’s that unlined face you fell in love with so long ago! And instead of nattering away about all the tedious things your wife is always going on about, this ravishing new version has been programmed (by you) to talk about and care about all the things you are interested in.”

Now, I’m usually quick to dismiss Caitlin Flannigan as self-satisfied and over-intellectual. When I read this I wanted to believe it was a gross misunderstanding, entirely off-based and downright twisted. But the more I insist these things to myself, the more I recognize that her words reflect my own fears about having a daughter.

I see them at the grocery store, these mother-daughter teams. The girls are in high school, wearing their volleyball shorts and cheerleading uniforms. They are still a little awkward; they don’t have their mother’s lived-in confidence. But I compare their legs and their hair and can’t deny the younger of the two have an appeal that exercise, creams, and surgery can’t replicate. That appeal is in the midst of reaching its apex on me, if it hasn’t already, and its decline is inevitable.

I’ve been keeping my prediction to myself. I’m too proud to explain that the hunch I’m having a girl is due to a heightened awareness of my own mortality. A waning in my sense of sexuality. Cracks in my confidence: hard-earned confidence that never came naturally and took years to build. It feels like I’m incubating my own death sentence and this is not the kind of chit-chat one makes in line at the drug store or while sipping sparkling grape juice at a baby shower.

I’m afraid now that I *am* going to have the daughter I’ve always wanted, always imagined myself having. I’m beginning to wonder if the women who say they *just knew*

what they were having knew because of the same vague, disturbing feelings: indistinct, but undeniably there, just the same. *You don't even know*, I tell myself. *You're probably wrong and just inventing places on which your ever-present anxiety can land. You would love to have a girl and you're just giving yourself something to worry about so that you won't be disappointed when it's a boy.* Maybe these things are true. While it's easy to know when I'm lying to other people, it's more difficult to realize when I'm lying to myself.

When I was young, in elementary school, my mom was a high-school Spanish teacher and, subsequently, one of the Junior/Senior class sponsors, which meant that she helped decorate for prom. She took me along on the nights she went to the gymnasium and, with the girls on the student council, we hung streamers, balloons, and Hawaiian murals. I felt so grown-up, decorating for prom with all of the high school girls. It was a ritual in our small town for the community to crowd around outside the gym on prom night and watch the couples arrive. The flashier the entrance, the more the audience cheered. Couples showed up in semi-trucks, on motorcycles, on roller-skates. And the gowns. Oh, I loved the gowns. They were bright—metallic—and full and ambitious, with hair to match. I couldn't *wait* to wear a dress like that—don't even get me started on those bangs!— and one prom night, after the show was over, my mom found me sobbing in my room.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“I'm afraid that by the time I get to high school,” I wailed, “there won't be a prom!”

\*

When I was 16, I went to prom. By then, the big, brassy dresses and curls of the 80's were out, and the sleek, straight gowns and chignons of the 90's were in. I stepped out of the house wearing a long, black dress with an open back and black satin gloves, and was only half-joking when I looked around for a red carpet and paparazzi. When would life get better than this? When would I be more beautiful? Didn't everyone want to be me right now?

As the night wore on, I sang along to The Village People, swayed awkwardly to Celine Dion, and munched on little sausages stabbed with toothpicks. I vaguely remember inflated pink flamingos floating in a kiddie pool. The initial feelings of pride in my formal wear quickly deteriorated into annoyance at the tugging and inspecting required for such a look. I observed some of my classmates, decked in ties and cummerbunds, tossing artificially flavored, electric-orange crackers in the shape of fish at one another, mouths agape. It occurred to me: *if this is the most important night of my life, I am doubtful about my future.*

It's humbling to remember the different crises in my life, the ones that seem so shallow and trivial now, yet left me anxiety-ridden at the time. The most humbling are the ones that concern my vanity, especially because I try in vain not to be so vain. It dawns on me now that prom is the pinnacle celebration of what it means to be young and beautiful in a culture that values such things, and I remember how disillusioned I was after an uneventful night ended in flannel pajamas and smudged mascara. So when I feel this current anxiety taking over, when the thought of having a girl keeps me awake at night and blurs my ability to distinguish between the rational and irrational fears, I

remember the words my mother said to me the night she found me in hysterics over the possibility of a life without prom. I understand now why her reaction was dismissive; I realize that she knew something I didn't, but couldn't explain it at the time. I would have to learn for myself.

“Trust me,” she said. “There will always be prom.”

## A Boob's Job

About five years ago, when my twin sons were newborns, I found myself at the lake, in a bikini, sitting next to a skinny blonde from Florida with fake tits. One could argue that we had the best-looking racks at the lake: both of us had boobs that were big, round, and firm. Firm is an understatement; they were hard as rocks, really. And they rested high enough that we both could have lowered our chins to take a nap. I should have been proud that my free, real breasts looked just as good as her three-thousand-dollar fake breasts. But the milk leaking out of my bathing suit and dripping onto my leg reminded me that, while hers would still look like they do in a year, I would be tucking mine into my pants.

That summer I had become a mother which meant, as Rebecca Woolf articulates so vividly in her memoir *Rockabye*, my pussy had become a vagina and my tits had turned into breasts. It was Fourth of July and there were going to be fireworks over the lake, but we were heading home early that year: my husband, Chris, and I were not getting along because he couldn't tell the blonde had fake tits. I had to explain to him how they could be identified, which infuriated me. How could he not tell? How could this shallow, self-absorbed, superficial woman get by in life with fake tits passing as real ones? How was I supposed to celebrate freedom with her around?

The weekend trip to a friends' lake house was not going well. I sprayed milk in Chris' face in the car on the way down because he was mocking Tori Amos. He didn't think it was funny. Then I met a colleague of my husband's, Matt, a handsome guy in his early twenties, and got a much-needed boost to my confidence when he turned his attention to me until he asked, "So, are you like, lactating *right now*?"

Although I am crazy-in-love with my husband, I felt a pang inside when I realized a guy with whom I might have been flirting wildly a few years prior was asking what it felt like when my milk came in. What a strange obsession this guy had with a woman's biological functioning. For the rest of the weekend, Matt wanted to be the one who introduced me to newcomers. "This is Maria," he'd say. "She's lactating."

And then we had the blonde from Florida. When she arrived, she stepped out of a luxury rental car in heels and designer sunglasses, her dark bronze skin seeming even more exotic against her white dress. Along with the men, I sized up her long legs, unnaturally large breasts considering her otherwise small frame, and was immediately relieved to see her. As soon as she spoke, I knew I wouldn't like her, but she would definitely help me fit in with the other women. If one thing can unify a group of otherwise hesitant females, it's a rich bimbo with fake tits. The rest of us would congregate in the water on floaties, out of range, and talk about her and her boob job and bad personality and try to feel better that at least we were interesting people.

Naturally, I had to know what Chris thought of her breasts. When we were alone, I managed to manipulate the conversation enough to get the information I wanted. (He eventually learned how to avoid my "traps," as he presently refers to them.) I wasn't upset when he admitted she had a nice body, but I was outraged at his genuine surprise to learn her breasts were fake.

"How can you think they're real?" I asked him, incredulously. "They don't move when she does, they're incredibly high and far apart, and that hot-pink string bikini does not provide the kind of support she would *really* need to lift a rack like that!"

He was silent for a moment, which lead me to believe that he was about to give in and admit, *You're right, Maria. Of course her breasts are fake. How could I have not realized it? She is obviously insecure and shallow and half the woman you are.*

Instead, he replied, "Do you realize you've been looking at her chest more than any guy here?"

Chris and I had to do a lot of recalibrating those first couple years after becoming parents. In another life, details from a weekend at the lake included tequila, pot, and sunburns. The transition to breastmilk, diapers, and shade wasn't an easy one. We were among the first of our friends to have children and we were struggling. Looking back, I view that weekend as a clumsy attempt to fit our new life back into our old one.

It wasn't working. Why did I think it would? Didn't I learn anything by witnessing Britney Spears' complete and utter disaster of a transition? And she had personal assistants.

In the early days after becoming a mother I felt as if I was living in an alternate, invisible world. The first time I left the house alone after nesting in with my new family was sometime during the second week. I was excited by the prospect of getting out by myself, even if it was just to drop something off at the post office. As I was solely responsible for producing the boys' food, my husband was nervous for me to leave without giving him a back-up supply of breast milk. I pumped for fifteen minutes to leave the house for ten, and went on my way. As I stood in the same-old post office line with the usual suspects clutching their parcels and sighing, I started to fidget with anxiety. Had life always been this mundane previous to the delivery of my twins? I

suddenly became overwhelmed with an urge to grab the nearest pedestrian and start shaking him. “DO YOU REALIZE I HAVE GIVEN BIRTH TO ANOTHER HUMAN BEING?” I wanted to yell. “DOES ANYONE HERE HAVE ANY FUCKING CLUE WHAT THAT MEANS?”

And now, after having a third, I still can’t get over the enormous depths of meaning and intensity having children has given my life. But that doesn’t mean I can’t also be shallow. I will admit now to a superficial realization I’ve had since being twice pregnant and breastfeeding three children: I used to have spectacular tits. Perfect, really. I still blush when I remember a decade-old scene, when I was single and a new lover was seeing me naked for the first time. His expression. And he tried to play it cool.

“I bet you hear this all the time,” he said. “But I have to say, you have amazing breasts.”

And I did, though I didn’t realize it at the time. Back then, I was modest and embarrassed. I’d had a difficult rapport with my breasts. I spent the majority of my post-adolescent life hating them. To the girls in my junior high and high school, plump, perky breasts signaled “loose” behavior. I couldn’t erase all of the “slut” graffiti next to my name in the bathroom stalls, which was in no way an assessment of my sexual activity as much as it was determined by my 34C bra size. (In retrospect, now that I’ve worn nursing bras in size DD, I’m wondering why a C was considered so big...)

After high school, once I got more serious about running and lifting weights, I was told a number of times, in various ways, that “real” athletes don’t have breasts. They are just mounds of fat, after all. These comments, on top of the names that accumulated over the years (“Booby-diver,” from the days at the swimming pool, particularly stings),

were thrown into one big pile in my mind under, “Reasons Why I Hate My Boobs.” I spent most of those years hiding my breasts, smashing them, covering them, despising them. I used to cup them with my hands in front of the mirror and press up as hard as I could to admire my ribs underneath: what I might look like if my breasts weren’t there.

After so much ambivalence over my breasts, when it was time to breastfeed, I was ready to let them shine. Because formula was so popular for so many years, I’ve heard other women say they grew up not knowing milk could be found somewhere other than a bottle. For me, it was the opposite. My mother breastfed all five of her children. If I saw a baby with a bottle, the child was a toddler drinking juice. I grew up thinking formula was an emergency-only solution for babies who were adopted. My mother-in-law breastfed Chris and his two younger sisters as well, so he was not shy about the process. Now that I understand more about birthing, feeding, and scheduling, I realize there are as many styles and choices for parenting as there are shapes and sizes of breasts, but for me, formula wasn’t even an option. Finally, I thought, after so many years of being unsure about my body, these breasts are going to enable me to do something natural and healthy and I would love them for it. I assumed breastfeeding would come easily and that I might even have moments of euphoria I’ve heard described by other mothers. Even when I found out I was having twins, when people *really* questioned my decision, I didn’t think twice. Two boobies, two babies, right? I couldn’t get more efficient if I tried.

I was not ready for the phenomenon that is “over-production.” When my milk came in, I didn’t have the typical couple of days of uncomfortable fullness: I had weeks, months. It didn’t matter how many breast pads I used to absorb the leaking, how many

cabbage leaves I stuffed down my shirt. Within minutes of nursing or pumping, sticky white liquid would spray from all ducts. It would squirt the boys in the face as soon as I pulled down my nursing bra. Latching on wasn't a problem, as they just opened their tiny mouths and lapped it up with their tongues, like little puppies drinking from a big bowl.

With two babies eating every couple of hours, I nursed over eight hours a day. The fabric on our couch wore down into a particular round pattern where I sat day and night with my twin-breast-feeding pillow in what my brother referred to as the “double-barrel position.” When I realized how often I was taking off my shirt, I stopped dressing altogether. After a several baby-gift deliveries, the UPS man was no longer surprised when I answered the door in my underwear, an oversized U-shaped pillow fastened around my waste, with an infant on my boob. Chris had grown accustomed to the sight of me plugged into the auxiliary jack in our car, pumping on the Interstate as we passed semi-drivers and police officers alike. The extra supply finally straightened itself out after six long months, when I decided to supplement one feeding a day with organic formula. At nine months, I gave the boys half of their feedings with formula and discovered what it might have been like to be producing milk for only one baby.

But even when I did have one baby, my third, the over-production picked up where it had left off. After my daughter was born, I had the same problems I had with the twins, including plugged ducts and mastitis, until several months in, as a last resort, I took estrogen pills to lighten my supply. I never did come to enjoy breastfeeding like I thought I would—an experience I thought would be natural and easy until I actually went through it.

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I can't help but feel I've always been disappointed by my breasts. At first, they were a source of anxiety, aesthetically. Then they were a source of anxiety, pragmatically. And now that they resemble what my friend Alix refers to as tennis balls hanging in the bottom of tube socks, they are a source of anxiety again. I'm so worried about looking like I belong on the cover of *National Geographic* with the tribal women that I can't possibly have a realistic grasp of what condition my boobs are in. How much more unappreciative can a woman get when her breasts have done their biologically fundamental job *three times over* and she can't learn to accept them for what they are?

There is a big lie I tell myself often: that I don't care about physical appearances. I don't care how I look, how others look, and how we compare. And as I was floating in the lake with the other women that Fourth of July weekend, scrutinizing the blonde from Florida, and then scrutinizing ourselves, I said something that I hope I believed, even if it was just for a moment. I told the girls that creating, and then growing, birthing, and feeding another human being has made this "body stuff" unimportant. When it came down to the ringer, my body performed with flying colors. When we discover what our bodies are capable of—and childbirth taught me that it's beyond what I ever could imagine—there is no choice other than to be reverent of what we have, even if it's not always our idea of "perfect."

But, yes, I care how I look. And I *really* care that I care. I'm not proud of considering the possibility that one day, I may call the skinny blonde from Florida for the number of her plastic surgeon. For now, I am wearing my extra-separating, extra-lifting, extra-uncomfortable Miracle Bra from Victoria's Secret. But that doesn't mean that I'm

not also proud of my breasts from the past. Proud of how they once looked. Proud of nourishment they once provided. And I hope to learn from women who are proud of their own breasts now: breasts that are breastfeeding; breasts that are embarrassingly small or overwhelmingly large; breasts that have been through a thing or two. These are women who know that a real boob job is more than a matter of money.

## Deconstructing the MILF

*Lovers make a gift of your body; so do children.  
The body again becomes distinct, edged, a marvel you'd forgotten  
retrieved by the unexpected.*  
--Kate Moses

One hot, damp afternoon, in the middle of August, I decided to walk downtown with my two-year-old twins in the stroller. Chris was out of town for work—he does this about once a month, just often enough to reinforce the tremendous respect I have for single parents. When Chris is out of town, I have predictable identity crises, usually in the evenings. When one spends all day, every day, caring for young children in the isolation of the home, she eagerly looks forward to conversation with another adult, which explains why I was invited to so many “play dates” after giving birth. Initially, I was confused. Don’t these parents, whose children are older than mine, remember that newborns don’t do much playing? But after spending months at home with newborns, I understood: it’s the adults who need play dates, not the children. (This explains why I was always asked to bring vodka with the bouncy seats.) When Chris, my steadfast human link to the rest of the world, is out of town, I’ll do anything to feel connected to other adults, even if it means taking the twins to a coffee shop to hunker down in a chair and eavesdrop on total strangers.

I was alone with the boys during the hottest week of the summer; I’d been rotating between cotton pajamas and an old, stretched-out bathing suit, and I hadn’t spent a substantial amount of time with another adult in three days. As a result, I felt lonely, dowdy, and bored. I decided to spiff up in a cobalt-blue summer dress and gold sandals, pulling my long, dark hair off my neck. I *almost* felt transformed into the semblance of an attractive, feminine woman, but something was missing: No one was there to notice.

Sometimes, narcissism allows a glance in the mirror to satisfy my craving for acknowledgment. But this time, I was feeling particularly vain, probably a result from feeling particularly insecure. I needed reassurance that I *could* be the only person existing in my own body; that I was not *three* people existing together in *three* bodies, like I was when I was pregnant and the way it sometimes feels with young children who know no physical boundaries. I needed to be around people who understood physical boundaries.

We live in a university town, and the college kids were returning for the fall semester. I knew the air downtown would be full of a distinct energy—the only thing like it is campus on the first warm, spring day—when the atmosphere buzzes with an irresistible combination of innovation, anticipation, and sex. I finished the mile walk an embodiment of August in Kansas: sweating, tanned, ablaze. Once downtown, my steps lightened as I soaked up the vitality unique to a student invasion. As I passed the patio of a popular hang-out, I heard a male voice declare, matter-of-factly: “MILF.” He didn’t shout; there wasn’t the strained inflection of tone that usually accompanies such an intrusion. It seemed like a simple statement.

Shocked, I gasped under my breath and quickened my step, acting as if I didn’t hear. Sure, I’d gone downtown to see and be seen, but I would never endorse whistles or catcalls to get the job done. Like many women, I find this behavior demeaning and offensive; while traveling, I’ve raged against *machismo* in places like Mexico and Italy, where blatant objectification of woman is sometimes accepted and expected. Who do these men think they are, to rate the level of a woman’s attractiveness and offer an unsolicited assessment? The only man I’ve confronted regarding such vulgar behavior is

my brother, once, when I heard him whistle at another woman. He said he was giving her self-esteem.

“What makes you so sure she gives a damn what you think?”

He got quiet, perhaps bewildered by the possibility that she didn't, in fact, give a damn.

On the afternoon of the MILF incident, I felt I had both the confidence and opportunity to face a participant of *machismo* (besides my brother, who didn't really count), look him right in the eyes, and show him that there is a person inside this body worth respect. I stopped the stroller and turned around, expecting him to lower his head in shame or pretend that the offense came from someone else. But when I faced him, *he* was looking *me* right in the eyes, smiling.

He was, actually, quite cute. I broke into a grin and kept walking, my head held a little higher.

I surprised myself that day. I didn't know what to say and didn't know what I thought. After all, I was single and not yet a mother the first time someone explained to me that a “MILF” was a “Mom I'd Like to Fuck.” I was enraged that such a term, let alone a concept, existed. I found it offensive and disrespectful. It's not only an obvious objectification of women, but an objectification of what I believed to be the most honorable of women: mothers. “Well, I've heard everything now,” I thought to myself, sounding much like my own mom. But after being on the receiving end of the obscenity and, frankly, *liking* it, I've done some asking around and realized I'm not the only one to be confused. A friend of mine said she finds the idea of the MILF to be offensive *and*

flattering, at the same time. For some reason, we both appreciate the recognition that a mother is still a sexual being and one to be desired.

The encounter made me wonder more about our cultural obsessions with, and misconceptions of, a mother's body. I thought of how, in 1991, Demi Moore not only blew away the pretense that a pregnant woman should be modest, but also introduced the possibility that she could be sexy. The image of her on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, very pregnant and very naked, with her bronze skin and chiseled bone structure, is hot. In the past several years, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, and *Glamour* have all featured nude, or near-nude, celebrities in advanced stages of pregnancy. However, Annie Leibovitz, the photographer of the groundbreaking image, recently wrote that, at the time, it was a scandal, "shocking and morally offensive to some people." She remembers that in some parts of the country, the newsstands that didn't refuse to sell it wrapped it in white paper, indicating it was pornographic or obscene.

Much has changed in two decades: I've been pregnant in a time when maternity clothes are formfitting and I didn't hesitate to wear a two-piece in public during my last trimester. I have a framed portrait of myself, nude and pregnant, hanging on the wall of my bedroom. (It didn't seem quite right over the living room mantel.) The pregnant women in my generation are showing more and wearing less, and we certainly seem proud to do it. Maternity blogs discuss the logistics of sexual positions and it seems quite clear: a pregnant woman is sexual and has sex. Is it a surprise, considering her condition?

It was only after giving birth that I've realized the aftermath of a long-standing cultural assumption Shari Thurer describes in *The Myths of Motherhood*: "Presumably a good mother extinguishes her libido with conception or else expels it along with her

placenta.” She writes that sex and motherhood do not mix well in our society, pointing to the ill-fated maternal heroines who succumb to their passions in nineteenth-century literature and twentieth-century cinema. Thurer’s explanation for the resistance to convergence of sexuality and maternity requires a cultural understanding of history that considers the major economic, religious, and philosophical factors in Western society that have contributed to the emphasis on the nuclear family. And “A mother’s sexuality,” she writes, “is usually threatening to her nuclear family: that is the human condition.”

In a post-Hester Prynne world, this message may not be so explicit, but I hear the residual effects in conversations every day. It seems a woman who has given birth cannot be complimented without the qualifying phrase “for a mother” tacked onto the end, as in “She looks great... *for a mother.*” Celebrity magazines marvel at the “body after baby” belonging to female entertainers, implying that the sexually attractive woman who has given birth is an anomaly. While the time frame in which some of these moms fit back into their bikinis is surprisingly short, the message headlines send is that most of us will be stuck looking at least semi-pregnant forever—that, somehow, our bodies will announce to the world, long after delivery, that we were guilty once of devouring a king-size Snickers, a bag of salt-n-vinegar kettle chips, and a tub of cottage cheese in the grocery store parking lot as a pre-dinner snack.

No matter how equal men and women become in co-parenting, no matter how much we re-define the meaning of the verbs “to mother” and “to father,” biological design dictates that men will always be exempt from the physical impressions maternity leaves on a woman’s body. We seem obsessed with such impressions. If a woman competes in a triathlon or becomes a Pilates instructor, I am quickly informed that she is

also a “mother of three!” implying that bearing children is some sort of handicap she has overcome. We aren’t informed of her maternal status for any other reason; otherwise, when a man participates in physical challenges we would hear “and he’s a father!” at the finish line, a qualifier I haven’t heard when a male crosses.

We know what mothers are *supposed* to look like: the cast of *Saturday Night Live* has managed to spoof the image in their “Mom Jeans” commercial. The satirical skit advertises high-waisted, decidedly unflattering pants, “cut generously to fit a mom’s body.” “Are you looking for the perfect gift for mom this Mother’s Day?” asks a voice off-camera, as four women jump out of a minivan and bend over a storm of children and pretzels. “Give her something that says, ‘I’m not a woman anymore: I’m a mom.’”

The fact alone that *SNL* is able to identify and parody the image indicates that this stereotype is antiquated and deceiving, but we are still left searching for a model of the maternal. In the past few issues of *Vanity Fair*, two actresses who gained respect through their artistic ability rather than celebrity, have been subjected to this type of evaluation. Kate Winslet and Cate Blanchett have built reputable careers through their careful balance of thoughtful performances in both art-house films and blockbusters. Neither lives anywhere near Hollywood, nor have we seen paparazzi shots of their naughty bits while they collapse into a limo. Yet the interviews focus on their status as mothers, and furthermore, the status of their bodies as mothers. We are told that Blanchett is “so slender you’d never guess she had a baby last spring...” And furthermore, she believes, “When you’ve had children, your body changes; there is a history to it. I like the evolution of that history.” (Though, looking at the photos of her, something tells me evolution has been kind.)

The assessment of Winslet is what really has me baffled. Accompanied by sensual photographs of her snowy skin, chameleon expressions, and bare backside, looking more beautiful than ever, the article concludes that, “after having two children, her body has settled into itself.”

I’m not even sure what that means. But I hope it happens to me.

I don’t think I’m alone in my desire to catch a glimpse of a successful compromise, some middle ground in the degree to which a mother maintains her former self and the way she negotiates the physical changes. Perhaps this process of development is hardest for those of us who are used to being in control of our body and constantly test its abilities. I understood the physical impact of motherhood intellectually but, like choosing which marathon to run in, I wanted to dictate the terms. Out of all the things I could have been scared of in my first pregnancy—the possible complications with twin gestation, the pain involved in an unmedicated labor and delivery, my appearance in the “after” photos—what concerned me most was my midwife’s offhanded remark, in a birthing class, that the cervix of a woman who has given birth will never be the same. Never mind that I didn’t know where or what, exactly, my cervix was or that no one besides my gynecologist will ever look at it closely; I just hated knowing that something about me, even an invisible thing, would be NEVER BE THE SAME. I had no control. Rebecca Woolf describes a similar fear more graphically in her memoir, *Rockabye*: “I am terrified that what was once a clean-shaven porn-star-esque pussy will now become a bushy vagina that hangs low like a wizard’s sleeve.”

The fears that Woolf and I voice are based on the prevalent correlation between sexuality and a physical ideal. When a pregnant woman has yet to confront and understand the changes in her body, this fear is legit. But I was unprepared for the positive transformation giving birth had on my sense of sexuality, an impact that, at once, had everything—and nothing—to do with physicality and its imperfections.

I usually don't bring up my experience having a "natural" childbirth—by this, I mean laboring and birthing without intervention—unless someone asks, as the issue of childbirth in our country has become quite controversial, polarizing, and emotionally charged. As with most realities, I had no idea of the complexities surrounding the issue until I faced it. Soon after I got pregnant, my sister, Crystal, asked me how I wanted to birth to go.

"What do you mean, 'how do I want it to go'? How does any birth go? I'll just have the baby and that will be that."

I didn't realize how helpful it would be to know there are a number of ways birth can go; that the verb "have" in this context is loaded with definitions and should not be preceded with the word "just." Crystal gave me a copy of *The Birth Book*. "It comes down to what you want," she said. "But you should at least know you have options."

It didn't take long for me to completely flip to an opposite approach: I made a detailed birth plan and decided I would follow in the footsteps of both my mother and mother-in-law and give birth myself—no one else doing it for me, nothing to help me "progress" or "feel more comfortable": I wanted to take my time and feel *everything*. (I will pause here to offer an important disclaimer: I realize my experience is one in a countless number of others. I believe *every* woman has insight based on her navigation

through giving birth. I've been lucky to have the option to birth without intervention. By sharing what I experienced, I don't mean to imply it's the "right" way or the "better" way: it's just the one I know.)

When I talk to other women about natural birth, many bring up the topic of pain, as I did with Crystal. But her assessment that the *fear* of pain is worse than the pain itself made sense to me, and I changed my belief that discomfort and pain are inherently bad things; after all, they accompany childbirth, the most natural thing my body has ever done. (Obviously, I am not one of the women who claim a natural childbirth is pain-free or triggers orgasm.) I looked at women I knew who had given birth without pain killer or intervention—a relatively high number considering the national statistics—and I was surprised to realize most of them are what I call "light-boned." They are women, like Crystal, who aren't particularly athletic and don't have a particularly high tolerance for discomfort. They are more "graceful gazelle" than "roaring tiger." Let's just say they are women I could beat in an arm-wrestling match if I was so inclined. Yet these were the women least afraid of giving birth on their own. If they could do it, I could do it.

Now I have much more respect for the light-bones in my life. I've labored and given birth twice on my own and it has been the most difficult thing I've done—physically, emotionally, psychologically—and also the most rewarding. It has taught me not to be afraid. The culmination of intensity, agony, and ecstasy of birth revealed a force in my body that fear can't reach. Sometimes, in birth, my mind cooperates with my body: *I'm safe. I trust you. I will let you do this*, she says. But sometimes my mind disconnects: *I'm vulnerable. I'm scared. I want you to stop*—and my body has to forge on without her. This is sexuality. This lack of fear, this awe at the sheer force of my own body, this secret

knowledge I have of myself: these things are sexual, rooted in the physical, but transcend it.

Is this sexual certainty, stemmed from my role as a “birth warrior,” the same women had in Paleolithic times, before men understood their role in reproduction? Back then, a *goddess* was the creator of life, and the earliest known religious icons, Thurer writes “are probably more sensibly understood as symbols of fecundity.” Was the original deity, the Great Mother—who was worshipped sensually and erotically because “sex was associated with life-giving powers, renewal, rebirth, and transformation”—the original MILF?

I realize what I’m saying contains implications for women who have had a different birth experience—or no birth experience—and I want to be clear with my intentions. The full potential of a woman’s sexuality can be realized in a number of ways; I happened to find my strength giving birth. When women possess and share sexual empowerment, no matter how they’ve gained it, the collective potential of our sex is limitless. I’m not critical of any woman’s choice regarding childbirth: I’m critical of a cultural legacy that has women fear childbirth, an experience that has the ability, in itself, to heal her from fear. Consider a verse in Genesis, one I had a morbid obsession with as a girl, underlining it in every Bible I got my hands on: as punishment for her sin in the Garden of Eden, God tells Eve, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain will you give birth to children.” So in our Judeo-Christian tradition, the pain I learned *not* to fear giving birth, the pain that taught me a deeper understanding of sexual empowerment, is supposed to be a woman’s punishment? Lord, please.

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“MILF.” Men throw around the acronym without much thought, and I get dizzy trying to make sense of it. Do they know from where the attraction to a mother stems? Do any of us know why we feel compelled to make the discernment when a physically engaged woman is a mother? I like to think the “M” in MILF stands for the sexually powerful mother I’ve become through my physical experience, not the mother described in the magazines—the woman whose sexuality is a surprise *because* she’s a mother.

The idiom “Mom I’d Like to Fuck” recognizes the significance of and value place on maternity (I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the MILF sounds so similar to “milk,” a liquid symbol of nurture, comfort, and strength), but the recognition is not a qualifier in the same way as “for a mother.” It refutes the myth that a woman’s previous desires disappear after she becomes a mother. And, finally, I happen to appreciate the passivity implied in the formal conditional phrase “would like to.” The conditional mood expresses a “hypothetical state of affairs, or an uncertain event that is contingent on another set of circumstances.” It’s a fantasy, boys. Chances are, it’s not gonna happen; and if it does, it will be the mother who decides.

**iv. placenta**

**sublime** \sə-blīm\ *adj.* of elevated spiritual, moral, or intellectual worth; transcendent excellence

## My Skin from the Inside

*Nothing, to be sure, had prepared me  
for the intensity of relationship already existing  
between me and a creature I had carried in my body.*

--Adrienne Rich

Luke has learned what a tummy is. He doesn't have any distinguishable words yet, but the amount of information he understands continues to astound us. We were at the lake up north on vacation when his father, Chris, pulled up Luke's shirt to show him. Immediately, Luke went over to his twin brother, Taj, and pulled up his shirt to see *his* tummy. Then, of course, they both wanted to see Mommy's tummy, and then Nonna's tummy, and so forth. Now, they walk up to the unsuspecting victim, point to her midsection and ask, "Uh?"

Luke won't show his tummy to anyone unless he's seen theirs. It can get a little awkward in social gatherings, but you don't care much if a toddler sees your tummy. It's everyone else in the room that you care about. I find myself wanting to peek at everyone's tummy, too. I've noticed that not one person will pull up his shirt un-self-consciously. He stalls around, holds his breath, lifts the shirt an inch, and quickly puts it back down. The rest of us act like we're not watching, but I think we all kind of want to see more tummies.

It's the belly button that fascinates Luke the most. If you let him look long enough, he'll eventually poke a finger into your belly button. It's a quick examination, though, because he's soon after his own, fumbling with the folds of his shirt until he lifts it up high enough to see the curious indentation, the dimpled little knob of mystery. At eighteen months, Luke is already displaying the behavior Hamilton Bailey discusses in *Demonstrations of Physical Signs in Clinical Surgery*: "every time an abdomen is

examined, the eyes of the clinician, almost instinctively, rest momentarily upon the umbilicus. How innumerable are the variations of this structure!” Gerhard Reibmann, a Berlin psychologist, gives the belly button even more approbation in *Centered: Understanding Yourself through Your Navel*. He believes that you can diagnose a person’s life expectancy, general health, and psychological state by looking at his or her belly button.

I’m not sure what it says about me, but mine has a tiny white scar on the right side from an attempted piercing on a school bus. Freshman year, band trip, boredom; it was a half-hearted attempt. I was using a friend’s earring and didn’t have anything to secure the opening had I really made it past the sight of blood. Still, I have always liked my belly button. I’ve never given it the obsessive inspections and comparisons I’ve given to other body parts. I thought maybe it’d be sexy to have an outie, and got one when I was pregnant. However, despite the exclamations that it was, in fact, cute, I quickly decided it didn’t count when it’s an outie because there is no more room for the innie, and then I wanted my old belly button back.

We all have one. There are all kinds of body parts I’ve heard that people are born without, or lose in war, or end up getting removed. Other than the mystical Pilate in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, I’ve never heard of anyone who didn’t have a belly button. Even Adam and Eve, who were never in a womb, have belly buttons. It’s right there, on the roof of the Sistine Chapel, although 500 years later the topic still generates debate. A belly button is our first scar. They are all different, like snowflakes; it’s a guaranteed way to distinguish identical twins. We learn at a young age that our belly buttons are the

special place where we were connected to our mommies. Because we are quite vulnerable at four or five, this puzzling union makes as much sense as some of the other strange things we are told, and we never seem to question it again.

The placenta is the only organ that is genetically and biologically part of two individual beings at the same time. Its relationship to the mother is relatively simple: it is attached to the uterine wall. But the intricate design of the baby's environment ensures that the fetus is connected to the placenta only by the umbilical cord. The fetus resides in a two layer "bubble" filled with fluid, the amniotic sac. In a typical pregnancy, for forty weeks the inner bubble, or amnion, is the baby's first home, and is protected by the outer bubble, or chorion. When a woman says her "water broke," she is referring to the important fluids that surround and protect the fetus.

My grandmother, Jean, had a scare mid-way through her seventh pregnancy. Her water broke extremely early, at four-and-a-half months. After three months of bed rest, she delivered a healthy baby girl, one month premature. Jean's body was able to produce and retain enough fluid that the fetus could live despite the failure of the amniotic sac. Without the placenta, however, there is no way the fetus can survive. It serves as a combination of liver, kidney, lungs, and intestines, all the while keeping the blood vessels of the mother separate from the blood vessels of the baby. The umbilical cord is composed of blood vessels and connective tissue with two arteries and a single vein. Arteries rarely carry de-oxygenated blood, but this is a case in which they do, along with waste from the baby, while the vein carries high-pressure, oxygenated blood, full of nutrients, back in through the belly button.

The placenta is a hard-working organ with several unique characteristics. At full term, it makes about 7.5 grams of protein a day, more than any other organ, and carries one liter of blood through the cord every minute. It is also the only organ designed to be disposable after its brief life. American culture is one of the few to treat it that way.

Ask a few people what they think about the placenta, and you'll get some interesting answers: embarrassed confessions of ignorance, secret fears of poking it during sex, something about growing award-winning roses with it, something about puppies eating it, and, "Wait! I think I heard of a *person* who ate one... *GROSS!*"

A friend of mine got right to the point when I asked her. "Isn't this something we don't HAVE to think about, at least until we have a baby? The dad doesn't really have to think about it. And the mom, if she doesn't wasn't to, doesn't really have to think about it either. Out of sight, out of mind."

Her thoughts are quite similar to what mine used to be, even when 33 weeks pregnant. I was 80% of the way through my pregnancy before I learned I was supplying blood and nutrients to not one but *two* growing babies. Until then, I was determined to have a natural childbirth, with no unnecessary procedures, which is why I had not had an ultra-sound. But when I consistently measured bigger than average, we decided to make sure I wasn't further along than we thought. "Shocked" doesn't even begin to describe our reaction when the sonogram technician showed us two heads, two hearts, four hands, and four feet. When she pointed out the sac and placenta, I was very confused.

"I thought the baby was *in* the placenta. And what is this sac you're talking about?" I asked.

Chris and the technician looked at me like my lips were on my forehead. After receiving a quick explanation, I pretended to understand and waited to get home to have my scientifically adept husband draw a picture for me. His little diagram consisted of a squiggly-looking baby inside a circle (the amniotic sac) with a line (the umbilical cord) connecting it to another circle (the placenta). I knew it wasn't actually ball-round, because the doctor did tell me it was flat, like a shortstack of pancakes. This is one description that seems to be popular. "Placenta" comes from the Latin word for cake, and "placent," an obsolete English word, means round, flat cake. It makes me wonder if having cake on our birthdays is symbolic of our first true birth-day "cake."

After Chris drew the diagram, I became increasingly interested in all of the science behind the birthing process. Carrying twins made it even more interesting, as it seemed that much more a miracle. Doctors pay extra attention to the placenta in twin births, as the arrangement can dramatically affect the outcome. Depending on when the egg separates to form identical twins, the babies can possibly end up sharing the same placenta, even the same chorion and amnion. For twins who share the same placenta, the risks of serious complications are up to ten times higher, and include the notorious twin-to-twin transfusion, a case in which one twin "steals" all of the nutrients and both die as a result. Fraternal twins, the result of two separate eggs, almost always have their own placentas. However, a test-tube baby birth in 2003 stunned doctors when boy-girl twins were nourished by the same placenta. In my case, we believed that my twins must be identical, as the sonogram showed only one placenta.

Towards the end of the pregnancy, I spent most of my waking hours in the water. When my feet and back started to ache, and my ribcage felt like it might pop right open, I

got out my green two-piece, stretched it over my enormous breasts and even larger behind, and waddled on down to the indoor aquatic center. There, alongside the high-school swim team and the handicap-water-aerobics-class, I transformed into the most fluid, graceful sea creature you've ever seen. Well, I felt like a mermaid, anyway. The high school kids might make reference to something more like the Loch Ness monster. When the pool closed for the evening, I went home and soaked in a hot bath. I spent my nights shifting around in the tub to get comfortable, inspecting my ever-evolving body. Because it was the only thing I could see, I stared at the slippery belly that rose out of the water like an island. I studied the constant kicking and poking--surreal moments when my already taut skin stretched a little further in the shape of an arm or foot and rippled across my midsection. Call it a lack of maternal instinct, but I never got over the disconcerting feeling of watching someone else move my skin from the *inside*.

I had no idea how much I would miss all of the commotion once it was gone.

After the births, the lab ran tests to determine that there were, in fact, two placentas that had fused together, and I had given birth to fraternal twins. Before the tests, after I first "delivered" the placenta (a job I sort of forgot I was going to have to do) I didn't want to see it. It's not that understanding how things work doesn't interest me; I just have difficulty with visuals, especially when blood, tissue, or nerves are involved. During childbirth, at the doctor's suggestion, I lightly touched the head that was protruding out of my body. Some women find this acknowledgment of progress to be motivating. I found it to be a little gross, and whined, "Um, I don't want to do that again."

So after ten hours of labor, two hours of pushing, and two human beings emerging from my body, I did not want to have to push out this mystery organ as well. I was annoyed at my placenta, the grey, bloody, veiny mess of a thing. No, thank you, I did not want to see it.

Chris glanced at it. “Whoa...cool.”

The placenta is getting more respect now that geneticists have discovered its cells have the capacity to become cells of other body parts and could potentially be used like stem cells to research certain diseases. Since G.W. Bush’s veto of federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, these cells from the placenta are worth more than ever. Natives in Hawaii are concerned over the interest in them, however, as their culture views the placenta as sacred, a part of the body that belongs to the mother or child. In fact, Hawaii has become the first state expressly to give a woman permission to take the placenta home from the hospital, after an uproar resulting when the state Department of Health classified it as “infectious waste.”

Native Hawaiians believe that the placenta--or “*iewe*,” pronounced eh-AY-vay--of the newborn child must be handled in a sacred manner, including a proper “planting” in the ground following a religious ritual. Sometimes a tree is planted at the same time and will grow with the child. Natives believe if the *iewe* is planted in the earth, the child will remain tied to the land. Furthermore, the handling of the *iewe* indicates how the child will grow up and form her identity.

Hawaiians are not the only culture to revere the placenta. In New Zealand, the Maoris have the same word for land and placenta: “*whenua*.” The indigenous Bolivian

Aymara and Quechua people believe that the placenta has its own spirit. It is to be washed and buried by the father in a secret and shady place. If this ritual is not done correctly, they believe the mother or baby may become very sick, and even die. In Southeast Asia, the Hmong word for placenta can be translated as “jacket,” as it is considered the infant’s first clothing. They believe after death the soul must retrace the journeys undertaken in life until it reaches the burial place of the jacket. Traditional Chinese medicine considers the placenta a powerful remedy to postpartum recovery, and it is prepared in the form of capsules to be taken by the mother.

The postpartum placenta is full of natural hormones, protein, and nutrients. All mammals participate in placentophagy, or eating the placenta, except Pinnipedia (walruses, seals), Cetacea (whales, dolphins), and marsupials, who reabsorb it. One school of thought explains this as a defense mechanism to hide the scent from predators. However, these animals leave the similarly-scented amniotic fluids, which would attract predators just as easily. Another theory behind placentophagy is that the animals need the extra nutrients and energy the placenta provides. But herbivores typically get all of their nutrients without ever eating meat, which makes me wonder if there is more to placentophagy than we can explain. Whatever the reasons, placentophagy is a natural instinct that humans seem to lack. Most humans.

When I asked an uncle for his thoughts on the placenta, he reflected back to his “hippie times.” He said he was having dinner at a friend’s apartment once, where several women lived, including one with a six-year-old son. He was asked to retrieve something from the freezer and noticed something odd. After some questioning, he was informed that the item he noticed was the roommate’s placenta, and that one day she intended to

eat it. My father mused, “I didn’t comment on the fact that after six years in a freezer, I wouldn’t touch a T-bone steak, let alone a placenta.”

Some midwives and natural living advocates recommend eating the placenta as a treatment for postpartum depression. They theorize that if ingested over a matter of days or weeks, the natural hormones in the placenta can give the body a more gradual adjustment to the drop of hormones after childbirth. Women who have experimented with postpartum depression and placentophagy swear by the improvements, not only in depression, but also in milk supply, hair, and skin. This may explain why the use of placenta in cosmetics has become increasingly popular. In 1994, Britain banned the practice of collecting placentas in hospitals, after the discovery that 360 tons of “placenta extract” was being bought and shipped by French pharmaceutical firms.

After discovering recipes for placenta lasagna and placenta stew, among other things, I stumbled upon an interesting debate in placentophagy. Those who have tried it keep pretty quiet, not only because of how strange and disgusting it sounds, but also because some people consider it a form of cannibalism. When I asked Chris if he would consider eating my placenta, as open-minded as he normally is, he hesitated.

“I don’t know. . . that’s like eating a part of your body.”

Some vegetarians might readily eat a placenta, reasoning that it is the only form of meat that does not involve the slaughter of an innocent animal. (I probably don’t need to point out that it does involve the pain of an innocent mother.)

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Most new mothers are appropriately warned of the dangers of the “baby blues,” and the even more serious post-partum depression. Cognizant of my tendency towards “bad spells” *before* pregnancy, I paid close attention to my weepiness, but chalked it up to fatigue and hormone swings. After all of it settled down a few days later, I still felt a vast *emptiness*. It wasn’t just that the boys were out of my belly now, because I felt as if I was mourning, as if one of them might have died. I would stare at my five-pound, healthy newborns, and tell myself, “They are right in front of you, no one is missing.” I could see them, and touch them, and smell them. Yet I still felt an enormous sense of loss. I would do as most scared first-time mothers do, and place my finger under their tiny noses to make sure I felt warm, light breath.

Finally, as the feeling of loss intensified deep inside my belly, I considered that it might be my placenta I was missing. Even though I still knew little more about it than the diagram Chris had drawn for me after our first sonogram, I did know that it was a pulsing, rich organ, very much alive. And I knew it was part of me. It was a part of me that worked so hard keeping two tiny, vulnerable boys healthy for thirty-eight weeks, and I didn’t even want to look at it. I didn’t even think about it when the cords were cut and the nurse took it down to the lab. Now I knew I missed it intensely, and that something very valuable to me *had* died, and I hadn’t even noticed.

It takes several months for a newborn to understand she is independent from her primary caregiver. My experience tells me this feeling is mutual. Intellectually, after I had given birth, I knew that my newborns were outside of my body, no longer taking up valuable real-estate in my physical identity. However, for months after birth, I had twinges deep inside that I mistook for some sort of movement. In his essay “Chimera,”

Gerald Callahan writes of what he calls “phantom memory.” This memory of our nervous systems is responsible for the sensation of phantom limbs for an amputee, phantom sights for the blind, phantom sounds for the deaf. He writes, “When something or someone is suddenly stripped from us, it seems natural that our minds would try to compensate.” What I’m experiencing must be a phantom organ. But not just any organ; this organ had the life-force of not one, but *three* human beings running through it. Even when I chase after my toddlers now, my chest will tighten for a brief moment with passing grief.

It’s not just the mother who is psychologically affected by the birthing process. The infant, whose psychological and emotional needs get overshadowed by physical scrutiny, may be affected more. In a Lotus birth, the umbilical cord is left uncut, to ease the shock of delivery for the infant. The baby remains attached to the placenta until it naturally falls off 3-10 days later, leaving a perfect belly button. Those parents and caretakers who have witnessed a Lotus birth claim that the baby is more relaxed and peaceful, and does not lose weight during the first week as is typical with a normal birth in which the cord is cut. Cord-banking, an expensive process that involves collecting and storing blood from the cut umbilical cord, is increasing in popularity. But advocates for Lotus birth ask, “If cord blood is so valuable, what does it mean for the newborn child to be deprived of it?”

The Ibo of Nigeria and Ghana treat the placenta as the dead twin of the live child and give it full burial rites. For something to die, I suppose it has to be alive, which undoubtedly makes this ritual questionable to our culture, as we attempt to draw clear

lines to distinguish when life begins. We don't often discuss the ambiguous physical separation between mother and baby, a separation that caused me to grieve even a shared *organ*. But my experience exemplifies the way pregnancy “involves a new relationship between ‘me’ and ‘other,’ between ‘my body’ and ‘not my body,’” as Daphne de Marneffe writes in *Maternal Desire*. This intimacy with another being's “otherness,” she says, “is an otherness instantly able to alter our own reality.”

Perhaps the placenta I gave birth to is just a disposable organ, and it is “out of sight, out of mind.” More important than giving my placenta the treatment it deserved, in any case, is the way I treat my living, breathing boys. My friend was right; no one *has* to think about it, but I do look a little closer at all of the belly buttons I get to see now. And while I may not be making placenta cocktail in my blender (never say “never”), you just might see a new tree in the yard after our next birth, a small but strong tree, thriving from the nutrients under the earth in which it's planted.

### Short: On Re-Rooting Hostas in the Middle of August

“I want to tell you something before you pee on that thing,” Chris said, as I was walking towards the bathroom. I would remind myself of what followed for years to come:

“Part of me will be disappointed if it’s not positive.”

The double lines appeared before I was done peeing. After shaking it a few times to see if maybe the results would change, I set it down on the surface closest to the bathroom door, which happened to be the stove, and immediately went back with the second one (of course they would put two in the pack), surprised how easily one can will oneself to go. It was also positive and after another round of shaking, I lined the second one next to the first and there they sat, side by side, next to a rusted electric burner. My mom, who was also our neighbor at the time, walked in the back door at that moment and into the kitchen to see what was new.

People would say, and I would repeat them, that *no one* can ever really plan for what life is like after having a baby, even couples who have been together for years. People would say all kinds of things with good intentions. They said things like, “My friend, Mary, has ‘Irish Twins’ and she says it’s harder than actual twins, because, you know, at least your twins are in the same stage at the same time.” They said things like “My friend, Sarah, is on her own. At least your boyfriend stuck around.” I always nodded in agreement and wondered why my acquaintances felt compelled to give me unsolicited encouragement. I tried to keep my misery to myself. I must have just looked as weary as I felt.

When the boys were eighteen months old, I went to a therapist. She said I resembled a person who is grieving. I was furious. I almost didn't go back: who experience the *gain* of a child as a loss? Apparently, I did. I looked up stages of grief and identified with most of them: denial, numbness, mechanical functioning, social isolation, misplaced feelings of anger and envy, bargaining, struggling to find meaning. How can a person in grief transport herself to the last stage, I wondered. Acceptance.

I felt alone. I was the first of my friends to have a child—children. Few seemed to understand. I went to a support group for Mothers of Twins, once I realized why support groups exist for mothers of twins. I was at least a decade younger than most of the women there and many were mothers after years of struggling with infertility and in-vitro. I felt ashamed to admit my pregnancy wasn't planned. I felt unappreciative and ungrateful for not being happy. I was too timid to suggest that we could relate: like many of them felt robbed of years by infecundity, I felt robbed of years by my fertility; that, for the first time in a heartbreaking search, I found a man who loved me unconditionally and I didn't even get him to myself.

Chris and I didn't exactly start with statistics on our side. We married months after we met, unaware that the likelihood of divorce increases with unplanned pregnancy and increases further after having multiples. I always agree I'm lucky that our situation worked out as well as it did, but really, while there are surprises that can't be anticipated, certainly some people have things more worked out than others. I'm surprised how often this hits me. Like the other day, when my best friend came by to introduce me to her first baby. "People said it would change my life," she said. "And it has, of course. So, that

doesn't surprise me. What surprises me is how much it's changed my life and *I don't even care.*"

Well, I can say I was happy for her, but really, my face must have turned red with rage. Suddenly, after not experiencing it for several years, the rage that clouded my first year after giving birth welled inside me again. I wanted her out of my house, this woman who says she doesn't care how her life has changed, because I didn't want to care, either, but I did: I cared so much that after five years of healing and even a new, *planned* baby, I'm back to a place where four quick words uttered by my friend, words she probably doesn't remember saying, send me in a tailspin back down to the bottom. The next day, I saw a mother lift her newborn out of his car seat and I flinched, as if someone had raised a hand to slap me.

The first time I planted a perennial was the year after I became a mother. I understood the concept—perennials are plants that grow back every spring—but was still surprised when, the next year, sure enough, the stiff green folds of a hosta poked through hard, solid ground. It never fails: every year, spring blows my mind. In the first days, when the sun is just setting during dinner and a breeze rustles the curtains through a newly opened-window, I can't believe I may get used to it. I remember falling in love one spring. I remember giving birth to twins the next.

Last summer, when the boys were four, I realized my hostas were getting too big for the plot I originally staked. With absolutely no preparation or education in transplanting perennials, I dug 'em up and split 'em, figuring if they didn't survive, they weren't the species for me.

I moved them from the north side of the house to the west side, in the heat of August, where they got too much sun and not enough moisture. They were shocked. Each day they looked weaker; each day I felt worse for what I'd done. I pruned them, brought out cups of water in the evenings, blocked them with shade in the hottest parts of the day. It looked very much like I'd made a mistake; like they wouldn't make it.

But anyone who knows hostas, knows not only did they make it, but they are breaking through again this very spring. A stirring, deep under ground, through ice and heat and poor planning, can't be squelched. There are tangible explanations for how these beings can demonstrate such failure to thrive and suddenly bloom magnificently, and then there are understandings you can only feel when you see: they adjust.

## Short: On Celestial Bodies Orbiting Our Home

My neighbor, Regina, is thinking about having kids. Thinking too hard, if you ask me, but if you ask her, she might say I didn't think hard enough. Lots of people don't, so she is erring on the side of caution. The woman *knows* kids. She is a social worker and meets children every day for counseling. They come from backgrounds and situations that I can barely stand to know exist. She is good with them, too. I don't mean good in the way I always tried to be "good with kids" before I actually had any of my own—I'd run around with them and treat them like puppets, doting on them in front of potential husbands and potential in-laws so everyone would be impressed by my breeding instincts—no, I mean Regina treats them like people. Autonomous beings, capable of sophisticated thoughts and feelings, and not exempt from acting like wild animals just because they are small and cute. Regina is not blinded by the "cute factor" of children, like I used to be when I thought a small child's world was made of all things sweet and simple and trite; she knows life isn't any easier or kinder to someone just because they're at eye-level with her kneecaps.

Regina asked me to explain what is so great about being a parent. She says it seems like parents are always asking her and her husband when they will have kids just so they can be as miserable as everyone else. My response was typical:

"It's...it's like...it's like...well, I just can't explain it. There aren't words."

"Don't you write about being a mother?" she asked. "Isn't that what you sit around thinking about all the time?"

"Well, yeah."

"Then you better try harder."

She's right. And I'm certainly not building my case when Chris is out of town and I show up at her door the second she drives in from work and beg her to watch the kids for ten minutes so I can go pick up a pizza in peace. I may have mentioned, in my state of desperation, that I might drive our mini-van-with-the-automatic-sliding-doors off the bridge near our home if I have to bring my children with me. This is because one of them can't find his shoes.

When I return, all smiles and patience, with a three-quarters veggie supreme and one-quarter pepperoni, I say, "That felt like the most decadent ten minutes of my life."

"Being a mother sounds awful," she replies.

I'm impressed by anyone who attempts to verbalize the parent experience with sincerity. It doesn't matter whether I agree with them or not, to hear someone at least *try* to articulate what seems inexplicable in a way that doesn't sound like it should be in a Hallmark card or a textbook for psychological disorders, is an honorable feat. But, for some reason, the more genuine the expression, the more the masses find fault with it. I can't believe the outrage over Ayelet Waldman's declaration in her essay "Truly, Madly, Guiltily" that she loves her husband more than her children. (And, as with most things that enrage the masses, the sentiment was taken quite out of context.) The only thing that surprised me about her position was that she thought to compare the two in the first place.

The love I feel for my husband is almost a tangible thing. Like soaking in a hot bath, it envelopes me. When I hold my breath and dip my head under, the love wraps around my entire body, making even my hair follicles weightless, so that I can feel its warmth spread from my scalp to my shoulders to my toes.

The love for my children isn't so easy to bear. They are like celestial bodies, orbiting our home. If I look at them too closely, if I try to pinpoint from where the love radiates, I have to shield myself from the glare. I can't get a handle on it. I can only approximate how much I love my children by weighing that love against how much I've come to fear. This is what I don't tell Regina. That, by bringing another being into the world, I've come to understand how much I have to lose. It's a fear that sometimes is so subtle, I almost forget it's there, but then sometimes it punches me in the gut, takes my breath away, and leaves me pleading with a god I'm not even sure exists.

## In Good Faith

*While Eeyore frets...  
And Piglet hesitates...  
And Rabbit calculates...  
And Owl pontificates...  
Pooh just is.*

--Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh*

Every couple years, Chris and I try to make it down to Sayulita, Mexico, a little village on the Pacific coast, for a week away from the biting Kansas winter. This past year, on our last full day of vacation, I found myself on a small blue motorboat, an 8-seater, cutting through the vast blue-grey water of the Pacific. The day before, Chris and I were walking on the beach, and I watched with envy as a group of people sped off on that same boat into the great wide open. I wanted to be them. There is something adventurous and sexy about boats and the culture that surrounds them.

“Where are they going?” I asked the man standing at the shore, who had just seen them off.

But I didn’t need to hear his answer, even if I had recognized the name of the destination. I just wanted to zoom off to sea with the sun on my skin and the wind in my hair, and it really didn’t matter where I was going. I explained to the man, Pablo, we had five in our group: my husband, our twin sons, my mother, and me. He offered to ask around and find another couple that might join us, so we could save money.

“Bring lunch and *cervezas*,” he said, and we agreed to come back the next morning at 11:00.

“Do you have life jackets for the children?” I asked. (Okay, so maybe this isn’t the sexiest part of the boat culture.) “They’re only three. *Solamente tres anos*.”

“Uh, si,” said Pablo, somewhat unconvincingly. “Remind me *manana*.”

This exchange was quite different from the ones I have back home in the States. Usually, to participate in an activity like this, reservations would be required weeks in advance and the paperwork involved would suggest I was enrolling in a life-threatening covert branch of the Secret Service. I could just hear the disapproval of some of my friends and family, people we can never convince to join us on our Mexico vacations. “Who is this guy?” “What if he doesn’t have life jackets?” “What if the other people he finds want to eat your husband and throw the rest of you overboard?”

But adventures like Pablo’s boat trip are the reason we travel to this small town in Mexico rather than the resort cities of Cancun and Cabos. There are certainly more Canadians and Americans in Sayulita than the first time I visited seven years ago, but with a population of 2,500, they won’t be seeing a Starbucks or Home Depot any time soon. While we *can* find a latte in Sayulita, it will be made at a cart on the cobblestone road by a woman named Rosa with beautiful black hair, who has children playing nearby. This is the Mexico my mother first introduced me to when I was twenty and she convinced me to drive through an Arizona border town to get to the people on the other side. I had been only to Tijuana and Matamoros before that and thought I knew Mexico enough to know it offered only violence and desperation, but my mom promised me it was different outside the border towns. She had fond memories of the time *she* was twenty and lived for a year in a small village, deep in the county. The trust and faith people have in one another in this culture puts our own to shame, she said. When we wandered into the poor but serene fishing village of Golfo de Santa Clara, I experienced a sense of inclusion and contentment among people who embraced us when they had so many reasons not to. After that trip, I traveled to Mexico frequently, stopping in the cities

only to touch down at the airport and taking the first bus out of town. I wouldn't get off until I was at least 50 miles out, which is how I discovered Sayulita.

We were running late the morning of our boat trip. I should have known better than to worry; no one in Sayulita seems to be concerned with precise measurements of time. When we finally met up with Pablo, he handed us two miniature life jackets and introduced us to Carlos, the driver, and a couple on their honeymoon who were joining us. We finally got an idea of what the day would bring: we were going to *Las Marietas*, a wildlife sanctuary and national park, to snorkel, and would stop for whale-watching on the way.

I had heard of whale-watching tours before this excursion, but didn't know what to make of them. They sound a bit too contrived to be as exhilarating as they are. Besides, how is a whale supposed to know when he is scheduled to make an appearance? But if someone is going to set me in the ocean and tell me to look for a 35-ton, water-dwelling mammal, by God, I'm going to put my Lasik surgery to use. In January, off the west coast of Mexico, the humpback whales can be spotted as they migrate south to mate. I wasn't sure what we were looking for, exactly, but when I suddenly saw a slick mass the color of the water ripple through the surface, I knew I was whale-watching. And I could tell that what I was seeing was a fraction of what was under the surface. A living creature, whose stomach was probably the size of our boat, was gliding gracefully, silently making its way. I felt clumsy and insignificant next to it.

"There's one!" I exclaimed, in a half-whisper. Everyone turned to look. We realized they were all around us, though we had to be looking in the right spot at the right

moment. Every once in a while, when we got lucky, we spotted the iconic image of a whale-tail flip in the water.

After my initial awe at the sights, I realized Luke and Taj wanted to be included in the excitement. Although they claimed otherwise, I wasn't sure they could spot the subtle, quiet movements, and it became urgent to me that they did, especially Luke, who was sitting on my lap. He has inherited my tendency to want to please people, much to my dismay. I thought this was a learned behavior, one I had picked up from some sort of childhood issue that a few sessions of therapy could solve. But as soon as he could communicate and connect with others, I realized Luke, like me, was born wanting to make people happy, even at the cost of his own psyche. Taj, like Chris, couldn't care less what others think, and this might save him from unnecessary stress and heartache later on. Luke, on the other hand, might say he could see the whales because he knew that's what was expected of him. For a three-year-old, this isn't *lying*; it is a heartbreaking example of his extreme desire to please.

I watched him and followed his eyes, giving up the opportunity to see anything more myself. "Do you see it, Luke?" I asked. "What does it look like?"

But he just repeated the descriptions everyone else was giving, and I became increasingly frustrated and anxious. It didn't make sense, my impulse to ensure he saw a whale. He's three. He probably won't remember what he saw years from now, anyway. But at that moment, I understood the extraordinary amount of faith he places in me—in all of us—the adults who care for him and even the ones who don't. It's an incredible gift and an incredible burden, having someone believe in you so much. If I was telling him that we were right next to one of the biggest living creatures in the world, he was going to

believe me. He was going to believe me so much that he might say he could see them too, even if he couldn't. I felt desperate for him to see the whales. I wanted to beg Carlos to go closer. I wanted to hold Luke over the edge of the boat. I wanted to jump in the water with him so he could touch them. I wanted to know that he knew what I was telling him was true.

The activity in the water died down a bit, and Carlos said it was time to go. I felt defeated. It didn't matter to me anymore what I was there to experience. I just wanted to know that my sons could see what I saw, could feel what I felt, and could keep their faith in me fully established. As Carlos started the motor and we gazed in the direction we were heading, Luke suddenly shouted, "Look! More whales!"

I turned my head. The water was still, other than the natural swells of the sea. I watched in silence. We all did. And then I saw the ripple and another tail. He was right. There were more.

Although Chris and I both grew up in Christian families, his Episcopal and mine Pentecostal, we are no longer connected to organized religion of any kind. I avoid attempts at articulating what I believe with even my closest friends. I can't even delineate it for myself, as it always seems to be in flux. When we first met, I often interrogated Chris on his views concerning the typical abstract questions—what happens when we die? why do innocent people suffer?—because I thought it was important that we were on the same page, whichever one that was. After many frustrating conversations in which nothing about his beliefs could be pinned down he finally asked me why I was so worried, since I wasn't sure either.

“Rather than spend so much thought and energy on the intangible things,” he said, “isn’t it more important that I focus on what I *do* know? Doing the right thing, right *now*, with consideration to the people around me?”

It took me a while to understand what he meant by this, but I had faith in his lack of faith, and felt relieved that we could move through life together without having to define and agree upon a set of unwavering beliefs. However, this lack of membership in any particular religious establishment leaves us longing for that sense of community we knew growing up in churches. People aren’t as eager to leave a casserole or flowers at the door of an identified atheist or agnostic (who, I was told as a child, has no morals or compassion) when there is a birth in the home or a death in the family. We have searched for ways to find a sense of community that isn’t based solely on a mutual understanding of faith, mostly because of fond memories we each have from childhood.

Some of my greatest childhood memories come from church camp. Once I turned ten, every summer for one week, I would go to a small campground in southern Missouri, memorize Bible verses by day and kiss the preacher’s son on the baseball field by night. The camp was Pentecostal, which means that the evening service concluded with an invitation to come forward for laying-on of hands and speaking in tongues. I had grown up watching the adults around me speak in tongues and pray over one another, climaxing in a whirlwind of intensity: crying, singing, shouting. It was one of God’s gifts and I wanted it badly.

One night, at camp, I decided it was time to be initiated into this tradition. “Children can do it, too,” I was told. “In fact, for children, it comes easier.” So I went forward and several of the counselors laid hands on me and prayed. “Don’t think too

hard, just ask God to fill you with his Holy Spirit.” I began to get very hot and uncomfortable. “What if I can’t do it?” I thought. “What if my faith isn’t strong enough?”

Every minute that passed felt like an hour, and I became aware that the music stopped and people were filing out of the sanctuary, heading to the bonfire or baseball field. “Don’t worry,” someone said. “We aren’t leaving here until you have been given the gift of tongues.” I felt like the eyes and hands on me were too close, much too close, and I wanted to get it over with. I began to pray aloud and then rumbled my tongue, making the same chanting sounds over and over again, raising my voice as I got comfortable with the rhythm of gibberish that was coming out of my mouth.

“Praise Jesus!” someone shouted.

When my mother came to pick me up that summer, the staff couldn’t wait to tell her that her daughter had been filled with the Holy Spirit and had spoken in tongues. I could see how proud they were, how proud my mother was, and their excitement for me was almost enough for me to believe I had really done it.

On our third day in Sayulita, we decided it would be best for the boys to take a break from the beach, sun, and water. They had been rising at daybreak, to the rooster’s crow and had been skipping their usual afternoon nap. We heard there was a DVD rental in town and thought this would be a good way to keep them inside for the morning. After breakfast, my mom took the boys home and Chris and I set out with the directions we always receive in town, no matter what we’re looking for: “Go over the bridge and take your first left.”

At the video place, a teenage girl smiled at us from behind the counter. She was chatting with what might have been her boyfriend, who was playing with several puppies on the floor. The sterile atmosphere of Blockbuster, this was not. After some deliberation between *Carros* and *Feliz Navidad, Winnie the Pooh!* we decided on the latter. Chris gave one of the puppies a pat on the head and brought the plastic case to the counter. The girl searched around and came up with a very unofficial-looking notepad, opened it to the first page, which was blank, and asked, "Address?"

"Ummm...I'm not sure," Chris replied. "Casa Cereza?"

"Is OK," she said. "Driver's License?"

Chris fumbled in his pockets, knowing full well he did not have his license, as we had been walking and riding busses since we arrived in Mexico. We wondered what this would mean, being trained in the American-movie-renting tradition of a full background check and late fees.

"Ummm...no."

"Is OK," she said. "Veinticinco Pesos." \$2.50.

"Ummm..." Chris blushed when he looked down at the cash he pulled out of his pocket. Veinte pesos, cinco pesos short.

"Is OK!" she said, took the money, and asked Chris to sign a blank page of the notebook, the only proof she would have of our existence.

With that, we thanked her, stepped over the puppies, and walked out of the store. For all she knew, she would never see *Feliz Navidad, Winnie the Pooh!* again, even though Chris and I would risk missing our flight out of the country to make sure we returned it before we departed. To her, we were two strangers who didn't have ID,

money, or an address, but she didn't seem worried either way. It could be that she was just helping out her parents' business and couldn't care less about *Feliz Navidad, Winnie the Pooh!*

I like to think she just had faith we would bring it back.

The older I got, the more often I was reminded of the importance of having “faith like a child.” The Bible verse in Matthew, from which this instruction emerges, is often taken out of context to imply that one must believe without doubt. When I was a child, I took this laudation of child-like faith as a compliment. *Kids can do something better than grown-ups.* But as I matured, I began to question this instruction. It smells suspicious. Am I really expected to believe in something as critical as the reason for my existence with the same passion as my belief in a skinny, winged vixen who slips coins under my pillow? Now that I have been the direct recipient of my children's faith, I can't help but think they're so vulnerable, so trusting, so eager to please, that telling them something is true just because *I* believe it is taking advantage of these qualities. I want them to find their own way when they are ready—when they are able of making informed, sophisticated decisions, when maturity and confidence can overcome an eagerness to please. I'm of the opinion that a god worth believing in would want that, too.

Before the boys began asking questions, I thought this reasoning let me off the hook more easily than my religious friends, those who have no problem setting down the spiritual guidelines for their children. But the first of many future conversations came up recently, and I'm insecure in my methods. After spending a day with his grandmother, Luke casually asked us over spaghetti if we knew about God.

“God?” I asked, making sure I’d heard correctly. It’s not a name that gets mentioned in our home often.

“Yeah,” he said. “Grandma says God is everywhere.”

Chris and I exchanged a look. We certainly honor the beliefs of our families and want the boys to respect all varieties of faith. When we go back to his home for Christmas, Chris instinctively bows on the kneelers to recite the Lord’s Prayer. When offered, I take communion, as I have formed a sort of personal symbolism behind it, albeit different from that of the church. However, we have been putting off the subject of God and everything that comes with it until the twins can understand that there is not a single defining answer to questions of faith.

“Well, some people say God is everywhere,” I began. Luke looked at his father.

“Do you say that, Daddy?”

“Um...” Chris struggled, and I could offer no help. I was just as curious as Luke.

“No,” he finally said. “I am one of those people who does not say it.”

Luke looked at me. “Do you say it?”

Now I was the one shifting in my chair as Chris looked just as inquisitively at me.

“Um...actually, I’m a person who doesn’t know what I say.”

Luke considered these answers and must have remembered a conversation he had with Chris earlier that day about germs.

“Well, if God is everywhere, is he like bacteria?”

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I'm a little more receptive to Buddhist explanations of having child-like faith. In Zen Buddhism, several aspects of the child-like state of mind are important to enlightenment and gained through "practice" or meditation. It's easy to see that children are the masters of "being in the moment." They have not yet learned to label and categorize their experiences. They encounter life without the filters of "good" and "bad" and, consequently, are able to have a direct experience every moment without the need to interpret each one. Furthermore, their awareness is wholly focused on the here and now. They have not learned yet that their pressing desires and needs can't always be fulfilled, and that a coping mechanism for this lesson is conceptualizing a past and future to place their subsequent anxiety. This comes later, as children mature and become the angst-ridden adults who cannot help but live in the past and worry about the future, a habit that those who meditate seek to address. The result of this practice, in regard to being in the moment, is to become childlike.

This last Christmas, the boys received *The Three Questions*, a children's book based on a story by Leo Tolstoy. In it, I found a perspective on faith similar to what Chris had tried to explain to me when we first met. In the story, a boy named Nikolai sets out to understand how to be a better person. After some bumbling, he meets a wise old turtle who finally helps him find the answers to his three questions: "The most important time is now. The most important one is the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side."

I can't tell my children much more beyond these things; besides, their existence seems to exemplify the lesson of *The Three Questions* much more than my own. Perhaps, instead of viewing our children as clean slates on which we can map out our beliefs, we

could learn a few things about faith from them. Kahlil Gibran has said, “Your daily life is your temple and your religion. When you enter into it take with you your all.” I don’t know anyone who is able to embody this philosophy day after day like children. And since I’m far from having all of the answers, what I can do for now is revel in, respect, and learn from the faith they place in me, as fleeting as it may be. I do know that the simplicity of an act as small as remembering a life jacket or returning a video, without having to sign a contract or pay a deposit, reminds me that something greater is in all of us. That when the moment comes, we can be trusted more than we sometimes give each other credit for.

The faith of our children, our faith in each other, faith in what can’t be known. We squint at the horizon, search along the water for the slightest ripple, the smallest sign that there is something worth believing in. And when something does rise to the top, even when we aren’t sure what we are looking for, we know that it is only a fraction of what’s under the surface.