I Say to You: World

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Sometimes the Writer Is Also the Mother: Writing Maternal Subjectivity

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A B S T R A C T

This creative-critical thesis is concerned with the contemporary writing of maternal subjectivity. In an effort to avoid the restrictive conventions of traditions of maternal representation, in so far as these tend to other or reify the maternal subject, I conceive of maternal subjectivity as something constitutionally ambivalent, fleeting, even contradictory. My intention has been for the two parts of the work – creative and critical – to be mutually informing, according to a process by which ideas are attempted through the possibilities afforded by different registers of writing.

The creative component, *I Say to You: World*, explores the defamiliarising experiences of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood. In it I seek to make and inhabit a form appropriate to these experiences and, consistently preoccupied with the question of how to write them, the work shifts between memoir, essay and fiction. Close attention to the physicality of the body and to the minutiae of the maternal day-to-day through often fragmented and apparently incohesive texts endeavours to create an immersive replication of motherhood.

The critical component, *Sometimes the Writer Is Also the Mother: Writing Maternal Subjectivity,* offers a reading of contemporary maternal literature. I construe maternity as generative, and through a study of three elements of lived maternal experience – interruption, effacement and objects – endeavour to exploit this site of potential. The project considers a wide corpus of writing of and about motherhood, within which two texts form the waymarks: *Mutability: Scripts for Infancy* by Andrea Brady and Lisa Baraitser's *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*. Through attending to the relation between maternal writing and maternal experience, I attempt to sketch a poetics of motherhood.

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I Say to You: World

Who was it yelled, cracking
the glass of delight?
Who sent the child
sobbing to bed, and woke it
later to comfort it?
I, I, I, I.
I multitude, I tyrant,
I angel, I you, you

— Denise Levertov

I'm speaking in favor of non-recognition, not of mistaken cognition. I'm speaking in favor of closeness, *without any familiarity*.
How good it is to not understand you. I don't understand you with an incomprehension so vast it surpasses all my great understanding of you.
But I pass through an incomprehension of you towards you, one that doesn't abandon you. It's a great activity of feeling and not translating. I say to you: world.

— Hélène Cixous

The earth was yielding these bodies, these clay people: it erupted them forth, it pressed them out. The same tan soil that embedded these people also made them; it grew and bore them. The clay people were earth itself, only shaped. The hazards of time had suspended their bodies in the act of pressing out into the air.

— Annie Dillard

C O N D I T I O N

The ceiling, painted pink like the walls, started to sway when I entered the room. Its bloated plaster already sagging with the damp, the ceiling swung lower and the walls too crept closer as I bent to strip the low bed. My stomach flipped, then flipped again.

I was living alone in a damp cottage that squatted in a landscape of alder carr, one in a line of tenants bent more towards isolation than comfort. Two up, two down, and rented on the cheap. The house was partitioned, half-half, downstairs into a kitchen and living room and upstairs, two bedrooms. A chimney at each gable offered the only heating; the small fireplaces were in the downstairs rooms. The bathroom was a lean-to adjoined to the west side of the cottage. The glazing leads in the low windows were set as diamonds and the front door was heavy and wide, its paint peeling. Honeysuckle hedges surrounded the house and, in the garden, a white lilac hung over a small pond. The cottage looked onto a field, at the far end of which an enormous, and vigorous, elm tree stood, testament to its remoteness.

I had moved in with a friend in March, that year when the sun shone every day and the temperatures struck the high teens for the whole month. We stripped, cleaned, then painted the house throughout, and replaced the MDF cupboards with some shelves we found and we raked the local flea market for enamel and furniture. That spring we ate breakfasts of poached eggs with pickle on the mossy lawn, read novels and lolled by the pond. On one occasion, we discovered a nest of seventeen small pale blue and brown pheasant eggs. Come autumn we scrumped in the long-unkempt orchard for apples, gathered baskets of the shaggy inkcaps and parasol mushrooms that proliferated in the unmanaged fields around us. We stripped the hedgerows of the purple-black elderberries, the blackberries, and the bitter crabapples. I don't think my housemate lasted past November, when the season changed and every day the wood we collected to burn would suffice for that day only, when every evening we would stay later crouched by the fire to put off the icy venture that was climbing between the sheets of our beds. Despite our investment in several electric heaters, it was freezing. On waking, the first kettle I would boil was to thaw the toilet cistern. The small rent dropped by 25% for single occupancy and snow.

It was January, a friend was coming to stay, and I was tidying the now-spare room, when the colour of the walls made me feel sick. They were rose madder, matt. It was as if I was hallucinating: the

pink walls closing in, the low ceiling swaying, and an overwhelming desire to vomit. I was having a dramatic physical response to a colour. Or so I thought. Pink! Who knew!

◆

The sequence of photos my friend took of me and you the following day show us walking a step too close, uncomfortable.

The camera follows the two figures from a distance, first along a path through some pinewoods, then over sand dunes and onto a wide stretch of otherwise empty beach, where they nearly vanish in the expanse. His body is bent sideways, towards and slightly over hers. They are as if whispering to one another. Her hands are clasped behind her back, perhaps as a declaration of aloofness, perhaps to hold herself together. Dressed in neutral colours against such a big landscape, the couple, minuscule in the middle ground, is almost missed. A detail, insignificant in the wider surround. And yet, closing in on them, those two figures, their bodies leant together, tiny on a grass path between the pine trees that border the dunes, closing in on them, the viewer glimpses a tight confidentiality, as if surprising upon something intimate and not meant to be witnessed.

The photos are stuck on the bookshelves beside me as I write. I can almost see the quiet in the lull before emerging onto the dunes, where sea and weather fling themselves, noise and light.

Perhaps only I can read the secret held in those pictures, the not-quite-decision that would change the course of our days.

◆

You had the coppicing rights to a woodland nearby and spent much of the winter working there. One day, a month or so after the pink episode, I went to with you. I remember how we built a small fire to heat the kettle before setting to work. And I remember the promise of spring that day, the shift in the colour and the angle of the light on the still-bare branches of the trees.

Yellower. Higher. How only in winter, before the trees leaf up, does light enter the woodland, and can the sky be seen from beneath. The family who lived in the cordwood cabin there were walking in an ancient part of the woods, where twisted silver birches entwine and hang low with old man's beard, where moss cushions the roots of the trees, and where in spring dog's mercury then bluebells cover the ground. Strange that we told them that very day that I was pregnant, by then nine weeks in.

You had given me a bill hook. The knife has a flat curved steel blade, two inches wide. The cutting edge is on the inside of the curve, which finishes in a soft point. The wooden handle is bound in leather. It is a beautiful thing. Machete by another name, to heft it is to be for an instant fiercer, for an instant feral. And, as with a machete, it is the swing of the tool that does the work, not the force of the person handling it. The metal latch at the end of the handle, countering the inward curve of the hook, prevents the tool from flying out of the hand when in use. You showed me how to ply it so that with the lightest of touches I could take the smaller branches off a tree.

After a morning of chainsawing, thrashing down alders, ash and cherry, we spent the afternoon with our bill hooks, shouting out the Latin names for the trees as their branches fell under the fall of our blades. *Alnus! Fraxinus excelsior! Prunus avium!* When I felt a slip in my gut, something strain between my hips with the swing of the hook, I did wonder if I should be doing that sort of work in *my condition*.

◆

What colour's the blood? Is it dark, or bright red? Are you having cramps? The midwife asked when I rang. *Hard to tell, pale if anything. No cramps, no. We'll book you in for a scan anyway, keep an eye on the bleeding. If anything changes, if it gets heavier, just call.*

Instead, I called a doctor friend, who got a train from London and came to stay. Together, the three of us, you, me, her, we waited on my body to make a decision. A being-together coloured by irresolution, by not quite being able to be. Me, hunting for some sort of knowing to hold on to. As if trying to clutch onto the foetus, to that imagined being somewhere in a far-off, yet so close, womb-enclose, to clutch onto it and resist the losing that was happening. Conjuring the tiny being

housed somewhere between stomach and bladder, sheltered by sacrum behind, pelvis to either side, flesh of stomach in front. As if with my mind I could hold it there. Willing those walls to stay strong. Straining my inner gaze to hold.

When the blood started to come heavier that evening, when I lay down in bed my knees wrapped around my belly and felt the cramps in my lower abdomen, I knew I could hold no longer. With that knowing the anxiety dissipated. I dozed beside you.

Ploughing into me cramps bring me awake and up on my feet and bent double and already my insides are dropping in a flump then catching in my clothes.

I scoop the mass from my knickers, from the crotch of my trousers, sling it lumpy, wet, bloody, the clothes too, in the bathtub.

My doctor friend picked through to find an embryo curled and white like a butter bean. You took it in your hands and placed it ever so gently in a pot.

◆

One evening, in the weeks that followed the miscarriage, I sped out of the cottage, down the wood-lined track that linked house and road. As I skidded to miss the squirrel that leapt in front of the car, I hit it. Not flattened, but still: in my wing mirror, unmoving on the drive.

I knelt down beside the animal before picking it up to feel for its heart.

In my hands it is long and limp, there is no flutter of heartbeat through the skin so thin it feels insufficient, like an insufficient bag slung over the limbs on its furless underside. Ribcage, stretch of skin over stomach to thigh, muscle so present it is hard to comprehend its stillness through the skin. The warmth of its unbeating body in my hands.

I bury the squirrel, curled as I imagine it would curl asleep, hibernating or dead, beneath a mound of leaves and the stuff of a woodland floor.

◆

The bill hook hangs from the roof in your workshop now. The handle is dark and glossy from use, the bands of leather that bind it are barely decipherable. The blade itself is knocked, there are chips out of what was a single sharp crescent of knife. But this wear and tear is not through my use. You have claimed the knife as your own now. I think you use it to coppice the woods each winter, that you're teaching the kids to use it too.

◆

For weeks, I was so fitful, overcautious on the road. Even now, I shy at the flight of bird, fix my gaze on roadside bank, hedgerow, copse. I drive in heightened readiness for the skirmish of animal in undergrowth. My eyes fill for each of those I encounter too late. (Is there a practice with which to attend to all these lives precociously lost?) Carcasses spread squeaky across the tarmac implore me as I turn away.

◆

The oak where the embryo is buried comes into leaf, mustard, old gold. Not green at all, the leaves on emerging.

S T O R Y

An uncanny feeling or experience is intimately bound up with language, and more particularly perhaps with a kind of *crisis in relation to language*. We call it 'uncanny' but we are also rather at a loss, we experience uncertainty, we encounter (however fleetingly) the sense of something *beyond language*, unnameable.

— Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle

To mis-carry is to carry wrongly, or badly. Much like mishandle, it is due to the fault of the person doing the action that the action fails; she who was carrying is implicated in the loss of what she carried. As such, it is a misnomer: a miscarriage just happens. A cause might be loosely pegged to it, but more often than not miscarriage is without attribution. The knowability of the event at a level of body and emotion is met (not met) by an empirical vagueness.

Is it this, the gauzy veil over miscarriage, that makes any knowing of the experience also one of not knowing, and was it this that had me reaching not for textbooks but for folktales? A felt recognition that the mysterious governance of the fabular spoke more directly to these early experiences of pregnancy and miscarriage than medical science would? Folktale, home to the obscene and the grotesque, which allows for extreme occurrences and unforeseen turns of events, seemed to offer an appropriate narrative. I imagined I'd read this, my story, before. I trawled through collections and retellings, sought out the Brothers Grimm, Angela Carter, as if one of their stories might contain, reiterate or dilute my own one. Reading then, just as writing now, seemed to offer a means of coming to terms with the miscarriage. But, the tale I wanted I couldn't find. One story I did read was in Italo Calvino's collection, *Italian Folktales*. In the story a woman wished for a baby, and when at last she gave birth to the longed-for infant, so her table birthed another table, her rosemary plant another rosemary plant. The strange humour of this reproduction tale had me recalling it in the weeks and months after the miscarriage. For some reason it struck a chord.

◆

It's hard to be okay with not knowing. There's an inclination, a need to make sense of things, to go over and over an event until the overlooked instant that explains everything reveals itself. My mother-in-law makes an art of this, of explanation, of revelation. She's adept at eking out the

reasoning behind things, skilled at recounting the original truths. It's her modus operandi: for her, everything has a source. She's at great pains to elucidate the morals or ancient lores buried beneath the otherworldy narratives of folktales, of old wives' tales and idioms. Reciter of nursery rhymes, singer of ballads, knower of herb lore and ancient remedy, friend to meadows and pastures, protector of rare flowers, she is also the keeper of the key to the church. The iron key is six inches long; it could unlock a chamber or a dungeon as a church. To her mind, the telling and retelling, the layering of tales that is oral storytelling serves to obscure the original meaning. She takes great pleasure in revealing the sources of those phrases we use on a day-to-day basis despite the sense no longer holding. She will lengthily recount the original story and demonstrate how the underlying sense lost through time leaves us with an eccentric phrase that has no bearing on our reality. In doing so she becomes a storyteller herself, unravelling tales as she unravels her lengthy washing lines and pegs up extravagant compositions of laundry, more fit for a fairy tale than a woman living on her own. I am not at odds with her approach. It is a pleasure to listen to the narratives that accompany her daily rituals. Battering the stems of roses, cooking nettles to feed her hens, or bundling sheaves of corn, she weaves these stories.

◆

Two years later, I followed storyteller Hugh Lupton through those same woods. As Hugh's lilting tales of strange and miraculous births weaved into the flecks of May light catching on the branches, now in leaf, the oak turning green, the ash already in thick cover, I recalled the blood that had started in the woods that day under the then-bare trees.

I didn't make the connection immediately, listening to Hugh's retellings of folktales. I was noticing the light through the green leaves, the early green, and the amount of yellow through it. But walking close to where we had been coppicing that winter, seeing the new shoots that now haloed the coppice stools, must have jogged a memory. Perhaps there was still some gut calling for a story to answer the interlude of pregnancy and miscarriage? Perhaps it was that that had drawn me to the woods again, and to the realm of storytelling. In the tales of changelings, of strange births and of babies as seers, what struck me then was how the miraculous and the mundane were cleaved together. It seemed that for the stories to work they needed both to exist in our world and to exist outside of our world, simultaneously. Only when deeply familiar could they then knock us sideways

with their strangeness. The stories dwelt in the heart, or at the hearth, of the familiar, and made that familiar odd.

But, more than that, as I listened to the stories I came to realise that a story doesn't have to *mean* anything. It doesn't have to symbolise something beyond itself, nor are there necessarily occult significations sunk at its origin. Sometimes the weirdness, the beyond-explanation is just that: weird and beyond-explanation. Perhaps it was for this reason that the Italian tale of the rosemary plant birthing another rosemary plant spoke to me. Sometimes the weirdness just is. And, sometimes the story suffices unto itself.

Where the stories would mean was not at the level of narrative, but otherwise. The way they reshaped perception, making meaning not in language that I could decipher, string out and reveal, as my mother-in-law does her washing, but rather as did the shape of the coppice stool, or the colour of the light through the leaves that day. Meaning, I saw, did not dwell in sense but in the sensory, it stood outside linguistic signification and found form in linguistic sensuality. This erotics of meaning would become something to hold onto, its own small kind of truth, and later a crucial tool for navigating motherhood, where I would often find myself stumbling along on a plane where the sense was unclear, where the unreal and the real were indecipherable, and where my day-to-day inhabited a terrain more akin to that uncanny one of folktale.

G O S S I P

Babies are whisked out of the room immediately following birth and the soothing sound of running water muffles any newborn cries to prevent the formation of what are called 'islands of memory'. Women waking from their twilight slumber are refreshed, ravenous for hearty German lunches of boiled beef and roast hare and amazed to meet the babies they have no recollection of birthing.

. . .

The women who give birth under Twilight Sleep experience agonising pain but remember nothing. Pain becomes a phantom, an unvoiced thing that haunts the body.

— Irene Lusztig
The Motherhood Archives

It wasn't until more recently however that this problematic of storytelling situated itself within a wider constellation, a more general configuration in which the stories of birth, labouring and mothering are embedded. A midwife friend had invited me to take part in a birth gathering, a weekend-long meeting of birth workers, in which midwives, doulas and students came together to share their skills, to share their stories and to share meals outside of the often-demoralising hospital environment. I had offered to show and lead a discussion on Irene Lusztig's documentary film *The Motherhood Archives*. The film had originally spoken to me for the way it showed just how contingent pregnancy, birth and mothering was on its moment in time. That day, however, as I watched it alongside the birth workers, what I perceived was how, in setting disparate scraps of archival material side by side, Lusztig was teaching me something about the making of stories. I saw a means of drawing the links between what had seemed like incoherent episodes, my pregnancy, my miscarriage, the pink walls, the woods, the squirrel, and I also saw how my story fitted within a wider one.

Lusztig's film focusses in particular on the tale of Twilight Sleep. In 1914, doctors in the German city of Freiburg discovered a means of giving birth that removed pain by erasing memory. An injection of morphine was followed by regulated injections of scopolamine, creating a continuous state of forgetting. Known as Twilight Sleep, the discovery was rapidly and widely circulated amongst feminist activists. That women would no longer have to endure the debilitating pain of childbirth was seen as a major step in women's rights and their fight for gender equality. In Lusztig's documentary, a hypnotic voiceover narrates the short but fervent tale of Twilight Sleep against a collage of archival footage. Once word had crossed the Atlantic to America, Twilight Sleep took a firm hold in the feminist movement there. In an era that predated contraception,

activists, so buoyed-up by its liberating possibilities, pamphleteered widely, held rallies in department stores and enjoined hospitals all over the United States to implement its use.

The discussion that followed homed in less on the Twilight Sleep movement, and more on the stills in the film in which two methods of diagnosing labouring women's pain were demonstrated. Drawings of a female body were provided for them to mark where on the body they were experiencing pain, an 'E' designated external pain, an 'I' internal, and 'E I' both. Next, the women were given a list of words and asked to circle those that most closely described that feeling of pain. Was their pain *flickering, quivering, pulsing, throbbing, tingling, itchy, smarting, stinging, dull, annoying, troublesome, miserable, intense, unbearable, spreading, radiating, penetrating, piercing, tight, numb, drawing, squeezing, tearing, cool, cold, freezing, nagging* or *nauseating*?

Our discussion considered the lapse between the experience of pain and the language we had with which to name it. Even with diagrams and a lexicon, pain seemed to elude definition. Its specific quality resisted both communication and the comprehension of another. Indeed, we noticed how narratives of pain seemed to be directly connected to memory: a memory of experiencing pain was clearer than the feeling of pain itself. Without the memory the pain too was erased. We had agreed that acquisition of language was a feminist imperative and we found ourselves frustrated by these shortcomings. Was it that language failed us? Or, had we yet to hone an appropriate language? And, we came to ask ourselves, were there perhaps areas of life (labour, birth etc.) that transcended language?

This problematic relation to pain is not novel, it is the subject of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, and more recently Eula Biss's essay 'The Pain Scale' among many other studies, but where it drew my attention was in what it intimated about a friction between birthgiving and storymaking.

As I listened to the birthworkers telling their stories of supporting women through labour and birth, and of their own experiences of giving birth, I began to recognise various qualities peculiar to these tales. As with folktales, they contained recurrent tropes: something was not as it was first perceived, a warning was not heeded, an adversity had to be overcome. There was always a twist in the story, there was metamorphosis, there was a resolution. But it was less the *what* of these stories than the *how* that I picked up on. They all followed a similar narrative structure which contained certain pivotal moments, the first contractions, the breaking of the waters, early labour, the period of transition, the head crowning, and then the birth of the baby. What this narrative

imposition seemed to reveal was not that labour and birth were coherent, chronological events but rather just how much they resisted order. So much so that the only means of telling them was to hang them to this skeletal structure.

There was a reverence around the telling of birth stories: once a story began, disparate conversations would stop, and everyone would listen in. As it was told, the story would become detached from the teller and inhabit the room, inhabit all of us there, all of our bodies. Perhaps the first time I encountered this it felt strange, even eerie. Now, having frequented many of these gatherings, and having spent much time amongst new mothers, this mode of storytelling is a familiar ritual to me. A birth story is constructed from the often-shambolic remnants of the event itself through the act of telling. It has to be pieced together from a few disjointed instances. Language appears to desert the process of labour, so the narrative skeleton offers a means of making what is unintelligible, intelligible. Through being told and then retold the story comes to have a life of its own. It doesn't belong to the teller but to all who hear it, becoming less specific to an individual than to a group. Through telling it is handed on, and it can then be reshaped and retold to fit other models and other situations.

Something else I noticed was the attention to language in their narratives. I saw the care and specificity with which certain words were applied in their stories and I saw the role words played in the births themselves. Some birthworkers preferred the use of *surges* or *waves* to describe contractions, they spoke of *breathing the baby out*. Others spoke unflinchingly and without drama of debilitating pain. They might not be able to describe the pain precisely, but it was there, absolutely. And, again, others talked of giving birth not as painful, but as pleasurable. These stories often referred to the sorts of obstetric violence carried out not in medical interventions, but in language. It was on a word that the narratives got stuck, and that the path of the labours changed. While this was considered a space in which all the stories could be told, it also became clear that only certain stories were appropriate to certain situations; the wrong story could derail a pregnancy, a labour. Hearing these stories made me think about the narratives construed by the Twilight Sleep mothers. Having no memory of the labour and birth itself, nor the pain undergone, what stories had they told themselves? And, to build on Lusztig's words, it seemed that it was not just pain that was the *unvoiced phantom haunting the body*, but the whole birth labour had this ghostly presence. Not so much *landing in the middle*, as a friend said of her experience of adopting her child, but, perhaps, falling out at the middle to return having skipped a chapter.

◆

There's a well-known retort to a playground taunt that goes *sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.* The irony is that it's words that get under the skin, words that bruise, words that do violence in a way that sticks and stones might never do. Words like stories settle into me and make their homes in me, deep under my skin. They stay with me in a way that skin smites do not.

Pregnancy is a time for getting fastidious about words. Or, know how pregnant, miscarrying, labouring, and mothering women are susceptible to words! (Hear me shout, scream this at the mishandler of language by their side.) For, what these birth narratives reminded me, was that we are all bodies susceptible to words, that we have to be so wary of the words we use and of the stories we tell. They posed a crucial question: What are the possible stories of pregnancy, labour and birth and with what words can we tell them?

◆

Lusztig's film flicks through images of the pamphlets used to promote the possibility of pain-free birth, through photos of Twilight Sleep babies paraded as happy, healthy products of an experiment, to, flick, flick, flick, images of labouring women in United States' hospitals constrained in straitjackets with continuous sleeves, or cuffed to their cots at ankles and wrists, their faces covered. Like a birth story told in sepia photos, the narrative suddenly shifts. The voiceover recounts how, once Twilight Sleep was disseminated throughout the United States and no longer under the strict observation and control of the women's clinic in Freiburg, its side-effects fast became delirium and uncontrollable behaviour. During labour, and despite being unaware of the pain they were undergoing, women would scream and writhe. They were restrained so that they did not harm themselves. The short Twilight Sleep movement vanished barely two years after it had begun, when a leading activist died in childbirth.

The images of labouring women's bodies under restraint carry their own ghosts. They recall exactly the photographic documentation by neurologist and anatomical pathologist Jean-Martin Charcot of the women interned in the Paris hospital, the Salpêtrière, at the end of the nineteenth century. His study of hysteria is chronicled in a series of black and white and sepia images of women under observation, in which their bodies seem to exceed their own physical architecture. I can see the arched backs, the swivelling heads, the gaping mouths recorded by Charcot and his students, mirrored in the footage of the Twilight Sleep mothers.

It is only on putting the two sets of images side-by-side that I begin to realise I am wrong. They are not alike. Or, if there is a resemblance, it is in the medical scrutiny that directs the camera alone. For, contrary to my memory, the late-nineteenth-century bodies are not restrained, not cuffed to the bed, nor dressed in constrictive clothing. It is precisely this lack of restraint that drew the attention of the neurologist and his students. And it is the women's bodies' very boundlessness that is the focus of the images.

However, it is not only the photographic documentation – the excessive female anatomy preserved by a doctor's lens – that makes of the Twilight Sleep mothers revenants of a previous generation of women, but also the so-called hysteria. (Hysterics *n. pl.* Bodies with wombs.) The frenzy that moves like a contagion through bodies, from one to the next. That finds a hospital crammed with women exhibiting a strange and repeated spate of symptoms. That finds multiples of women queuing up for drugs that will rewrite their memory of giving birth.

Con-tagion gives *with touch*. But the Twilight Sleep hysteria was not passed on with touch. It was carried on the tongue, held in words, imprinted in language. It was not the propagation of a disease but the propagation of stories.

Indeed, this contagion that raged from one person to the next seems more akin to gossip. And this seems fitting, for tracing the etymology of gossip leads in a proximal direction. Gossip gives God-sibs, the original godmothers and godfathers, those figures who, according to birth anthropologist Sheila Kitzinger, would often accompany the mother through the processes of pregnancy, birth and the first weeks of motherhood. Our *idle talk* refers in fact to that crucial talk, given predominantly by women, to mothers in medieval Europe. Gossips are those women, sisterly, who accompany labouring and birthing women. And gossip is the storytelling and storymaking that occurs at the bedsides of pregnant and labouring women and new mothers.

◆

Unlike birth however, tales of miscarriage are not often told. Perhaps it is the couching of the event in a language of wrongdoing and failure that means it is not spoken of. Perhaps it is the very difficulty of conceiving of early pregnancy, its existence reliant on several parts of fantasy or faith, so that to speak of its loss is to speak of other losses harder to bear. Perhaps it is the grief that silences. Or its tendency to occur in the first trimester of pregnancy, the twelve- to fourteen-week period coloured by secrecy and silence, when a woman is advised not to speak of the pregnancy, yet so unsure. (As if suddenly at the end of the first trimester it were more sure.) That period when the symptoms are heaviest – nausea, vomiting, torpor, turmoil of emotions, out-of-nowhere exhaustion – but when the pregnancy is not physiologically apparent. The twelve- to fourteen-week period when pregnant women carry on, tired to their skins, vomiting secretly into their pockets, not telling. There are superstitious undertones to this silence, a sense that to speak out might be to curse the pregnancy. And I too had wondered, implausible though I knew it was, I had wondered whether we should have told our friends that day in the woods that I was pregnant, and were we not to have done so, would the ensuing narrative have been different?

To be spoken therefore a miscarriage has to push through all these layers of not-telling. But if the foetus doesn't carry on beyond that first trimester, and if it is not spoken of, if the lost pregnancy falls into its own unstoried world, what then?

Some of the Twilight Sleep mothers would later suffer flashbacks. *Islands of memory* would surface, like ghosts, bringing them to experience an agonising labour and birth many years after it had taken place.

◆

There is another set of stories to mention, perhaps those that speak loudest amid all the chorusing that surrounds a pregnant woman: those of the medical professionals. My own experiences have

shown me that the statistics reeled off in a consultation with an obstetrician are enough to strip a woman of any sense of self-knowledge. These stories are part of a much wider narrative, and other factors such as prior experience, consultants' working hours, hospital pressures, lack of funding, fears of litigation, etc. skew the narrative. But the stories a consultant tells rarely seem to take into account the role of language in shaping a woman's experiences of pregnancy and childbirth.

Lusztig's film recognises how so much of the documentation and discourses around pregnancy, birth and motherhood make of it *an intense space of propaganda.* But acknowledging this, the power of words and stories to effect change in people's behaviour, reveals the obverse: it enables us to see the power of stories as catalysts able equally to inform and support pregnant and labouring women. That stories can be catalysts for changes in perception gives them a wondrous power.

The miscarriage, the birthstories, the folktales showed me this, and in subsequent pregnancies I was guided by the forms of knowing these stories had given me. I learnt to be choosy about the discourses I attended to and picked among those I heard to select the ones that resonated most closely with my own vision.

Of course, I recognise too, in my own selective hearing, in my wishful thinking, in my capacity to only hear what I wanted, a further barrier in the making and telling, in the propagation of stories.

◆

Miscarriage wasn't an ending. That short spate of time, between knowing I was pregnant and birthing a tiny embryo, was a beginning. It was an initiation into an unknown territory. A territory that when, three months later, I was again pregnant, was still strange. But I glimpsed then what I know now. I could see myself straddling the looking glass between this world and that. Its sheen. I could see the looking glass getting all *soft like gauze*, before it began *to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist*.

Life on the far side of the looking glass, I saw, was changeable. Terminology was play to strange slippages, punning, obfuscations. Sightings tricked the eyes. Magnifications, doublings,

multiplications abounded there. Different customs were observed on the far side. Customs that were invisible to those on the near side, but elaborately nuanced for those of us there.

One thing I do know about the far side is that as soon as you know anything, it defies you, shapechanges or vanishes and you find yourself not knowing once more: life on the far side is an exercise in unknowing. The story I want to tell is of the far side.

A P P A R I T I O N

There's a drawer at the end of this table, in which, among the old letters, postcards, bills, wedding invitations, receipts, pictures of other people's babies, instruction manuals, there's a photo of the house you lived in at around this time. Not then exactly, for I remember the day of the birth it snowed, and in the image the sky looks soft and claggy. But thenabouts, before we'd painted the front door, before we'd moved the kitchen downstairs. Yes, it must have been taken around the time I left my pink-roomed house, left my fields and the elm, and moved in, joined you in yours.

Here visible: Brick and flint facade, jetty, timber-framed studs with brick infill above jetty, leaded quarrels of C18 windows. Not quite visible: Carved stone corbel of grotesque head to South end of jetty (obscured by ladder). Not visible: Holes in the floor, plaster falling off interior walls, leaks in the roof that with heavy rain oblige buckets and the pushing of the bed across the upstairs bedroom (windows 1 & 2 lhs) to avoid the drips. A tiny hole-in-the-wall fireplace at hip height in the room to the left of the door downstairs. The light that surges in through the many east-facing windows on the first floor. The Virgin who appeared to Richeldis on three separate occasions in 1061. The hole that is a few steps falling down to a cellar. The arched fireplace in the upstairs bedroom. The sleepless nights, the always full bladder. The replica of the Holy House further on down the road to the right. The high tight belly worn with conviction. The road crushed with pilgrims at certain seasons of the year. The yearnings for oranges, for tomatoes. The Virgin Mary carried on a float on shoulders. The penitents falling to their knees. The slurring protestant at the corner. *Painted mimicry!* The skin on the stomach white to translucent. The entry in Pevsner dating the house to 1525. The limbs pressing their shape against the distended belly, so at times it is as if I could grab a hand, an elbow. The phial of Mary's breast milk, gifted once by a pilgrim and stored in the shrine. The immersion heater that makes gallons of hot water and a bath up to my neck. The lack of vis à vis. Tomato juice! The upstairs kitchen. The people smiling, touching me, *Can I?* Hands already there on the mound. *You're still very high.* The comments by passers-by. (There is much to be said of the public appropriation of the pregnant body, but I found I wanted to talk about it, found this intimacy with strangers pleasant. Was I beginning to mean something?) The little cards: *At the feet of Our Lady of Walsingham I have prayed for you.* The wires hanging out of the walls. The handwritten intercession slips. The damp growing in corners. The plaques thanking OLW for prayers answered. *Thanks for relief from pain since bathing in the Holy Well.* Someone shouting

across the street, *The babies, the years, the babies that have been born in that house!* Someone blessing me. The stories I had gleaned that I now recounted back to myself, drawing them close around me.

◆

Photographs, with their hard-edged sheen, don't seem to acquire patina nor have the plasticity of stories. Rather than keeping tempo with life, shifting and shapechanging as they are passed around, photos are stuck in their moment. They obey the immediacy of their tense and remain answerable to the photographed instant. As such photos act as a portal, they deliver us from this present to that in which they were taken.

This is also said of trauma, that it retains the glossy, present-tense clarity of the traumatic instant. Trauma seems to consistently shed the shading effects of time to revisit us with all the limpidity of the event itself. Like a found photo it resurfaces, sharp and ever-present.

As well as fixing something in time, a photo attests to something. Like a fact, a photo's an object of the archives, a visual proof.

But in putting words to these events, and to the few photos I have that document them, I am making them abide by the rules of story: they seem to be less answerable to the hard brilliance of the lived instant, than to the stipulations of narrative. I wonder how in writing about them this way I might be betraying the lived events. And whether it matters, or whether the art of story is that: to represent reality in a form in which it can be perceived as a whole, cohesive object.

But birth itself, I think, asks for another type of writing, a mode of writing through which, like photographs, the instances might surface as if anew.

◆

There are more photographs of the time in this drawer. And how easy it is to let photographs colour memory, *How happy we were then*, but looking through them, I realise that it is not the images themselves that wring me so.

First, standing, three pictures, heavily pregnant. The tummy button pushed, as if pressed with a thumb inside out, recalls a newborn umbilical stump, mother-to-be and child-to-come already in games of reciprocity. In the first of the images two hands are held beneath the stomach bearing its weight and recognising pregnancy as a carrying, in it the face, the gaze is still. In the next the shoulders are pulled up, the head bends to meet the left shoulder, the image blurs in movement, is it a convulsion or a grimace? Is the head turned in a gesture of coyness, is it affectation that moves the shoulders upward, is the standing woman embarrassed, or laughing? The hands are still held at the stomach, just. In the third, the laughter is wrapping up, or establishing itself, either way the smile is broad, shared.

The photographs aren't staged, they are off the cuff, they capture a play between the two people, observer and observed. There is a lightness that glances over the body in this standing triptych, lightness that isn't lost as in further pictures the figure settles on the bed, and its pregnant enormity becomes vast, as if once settled the body regains its weight and spills over. No longer obliged by the upward stance to defy gravity, it succumbs, breasts rest on and slop over either side of the stomach, the darkness of the nipples becomes apparent as does the line creeping up over the round of the stomach, marking it as spherical, globular. The shapes made when sitting mirror one another, they are cees and esses, fictive in their relation to fruit, ripe, or overripe. The splay of the hips and width of the back mark this body as housing another.

The last photo sets itself apart. The woman looks directly at the camera. She is serious. It is the intentness of the gaze meeting that of the camera that distinguishes this woman from the woman in the other photos. Perhaps something has been said, perhaps there are a few words hanging over the scene that have put paid to the playfulness. Or perhaps she is another woman. Becoming one.

Were it not for the photos I might have forgotten that body, its slump, the dark line across it. But it is not the detail of the images themselves that conjure a memory of something lost, but the language between person photographed and person photographing. There is a gentle cupping, cupping of camera in hand, cupping of pregnant body in image, a gathering of the body that is surely the work of love, and since, writing since, that same body has slipped away from me.

◆

The shredding brocade curtains were hanging from a joist. Floor to ceiling they made of the room a theatre. The woven gold leaves and flowers caught the light from the fire and sent it shimmering outwards across the room. The scene was decadent. Duvet over your head you were capitalising on sleep. You were lying in the bed in the centre of the room, while I was moaning and lolling around you. We had piled blankets and cushions on the floor by the windows, making a sort of birth stage, but standing, leaning, lunging was easier than lying down, so I was moving around the room, weaving between makeshift pillars, acrow props we'd installed to hold up the house, to give an illusion of solidity to the flaking fabric of the building, the sixteenth century wreck that was now our shared home. Moving, then stopping with the contractions. It was as I had read, as I'd been told. Labour was as I revised, it was as per my notes and diagrams, it was as per the stories I'd listened to. It could have been so many other things, so often it is something else, but it wasn't any of those, it was precisely as. It was a practice, a going into the pain, with my breath finding the pain and then moving out of it, folding my body to pass through another contraction, then floating. The breathing, the repetition, the pain, were entrancing. Labour asked of me in a physical way, to endure, but also to yield.

Then there was blood. Blood again, and again we rang the midwives. *That's a show*, they said, *nothing to worry about*.

◆

It was odd, living in Walsingham, a village of believers, through that time. Not just the blessings and prayers that were heaped on me, but the lustre it gave to everything, as if a miracle might indeed be about to happen.

As I write of my swollen body, of being pregnant in this village thronged with pilgrims and devotees, I can't help thinking about those medieval mystics, Ida of Louvain, Dorothy of Montau,

whose bodies swelled on ingestion of the host. The communion wafer *was* the body of Christ, and on consumption of his body they appeared to fall pregnant, either as the result of a perceived sexual union with Jesus, or the comprehension of his body in their own. I think of the levels of faith of those fourteenth century mystics had, that they could believe in transubstantiation to such a degree that they could fall mystically pregnant, and I think how their faith doesn't seem entirely distinct from the kind of faith any pregnancy requires.

Even in the later stages, limbs apparent, kicking away, it was hard to conceive of the baby. To believe in this thing, this fact, that cells divide and multiply, divide and multiply, to make of egg, embryo, and embryo, foetus, and foetus, baby, demands something of faith. And that this foetus is living inside my body and that my body will then eject it and that it will go on living outside of my body, seems to me of the order not of the medical but of the mystical.

Besides faith I required proofs, ultrasounds, the sweeping *dedum dedum* of the foetal heartbeat monitor, the visible swelling of my stomach. The blood that evening, the *show*, like a photo, was a visual proof. Used as a noun, in labour a *show* refers to the coming away of the mucal plug from the top of the cervix on dilation and effacement. It is a visual confirmation that labour is underway. The swelling of the stomach is also known as s*howing*, as in *You're not showing yet* or *I'm already showing*. To show is to visibly demonstrate, is to give verifiable proof of what is underway but otherwise invisible. There's a fixation on *showing*, on these proofs, perhaps because without them, pregnancy is so hard to fathom.

Mysticism too requires proofs, apparitions, relics, brief, concrete encounters to stimulate belief once more. Faith depends on portals on this side allowing access to that, the unknowable, intangible other side. Only on her third vision was Richeldis persuaded by the Virgin Mary's message: to build a replica of the Holy House where she stood. Today the Shrine in Walsingham stands as the physical manifestation of this apparition. A concrete proof of an eleventh century vision.

But part of me just wants to trust to the mystery, to what's not on show. Or perhaps there is simply no other way. For despite the shows, despite the proofs, despite the medical terminology, despite the midwife's confirmation that the head is engaged in cephalic position, despite the amplified *dedum* of the heartbeat, despite the huge expansion on the front of my body, despite the mucal plug, despite all this, right now there is no way I can get my head around the fact that a baby has

multiplied and divided itself into being, and that the pulsing I can feel across my stomach and reaching down into my lower back is the result of a baby that is about to appear out of me, into this room, here.

◆

The phone was ringing. Daylight was sliding through the shutters. I had been in labour on and off for 40 hours. At 4 we rang the midwives, but they were too busy to come out. At 6 we ran out of firewood. It was 25 March but the weather was below freezing, snow was due. You drove to the barn, 6 miles there, 6 miles back, to get more firewood. The 45 minutes you were away, my contractions ceased and I fell asleep. At 9, nearer 10, the midwife, D, arrived. It is March but could be the depth of winter. You answered the phone. It was an old friend. *I'm in the village, can I drop in for coffee?*

◆

And perhaps coming to terms with the vague and unreal happening in the depths of my body, the wholly inconceivable making of a new being within my own, perhaps I was still trying to come to terms with the possible loss of that being. For becoming a mother asked that I both acknowledge the reality of the baby, and, in so doing, acknowledge the possible loss of that baby, possibility that is wound into the core of motherhood, that inhabits the day as it frequents the nights. For only on having a baby can it be lost, and it was surely that that was hardest to conceive of, and hardest to bear. This possibility that wasn't limited to the first trimester, not to pregnancy, nor to the birth itself but would be inscribed into every instant thereafter. Yes, perhaps this is the hardest thing: life with a child is life riven with the possibility of losing that child. More than anything else it was this that was unthinkable.

◆

I am humming.

I am hung over a pilates ball.

I am breathing against the wall.

D is talking.

Can I examine you?, D is asking.

I am lying on the bed. D's gloved hand is in my vagina measuring the dilation of my cervix.

D is on the phone. *C, she's seven centimetres.*

Or

A contraction holds me, halts me, *haaaaaaaaaa*, against the wall. You come to me, touch me, rub my shoulder, hold my hand. I push you away.

Or

D and C are sitting by the fireplace drinking tea, discussing with you what they've been watching on the telly. That's just fine, you prefer it that way, filling the backdrop with the midwives.

Or

The body crumples down on the ball in pain crumples rises again crumples rises with an unlikely force unlikely this rising between contractions to the wall coming to meet the body standing body falling again onto the ball only saying the only words *it hurts.*

Or

If contractions are like waves then this is more like being caught in a wall of sea. This is more like mistakenly going for a swim when the waves are much stronger than they look. They lift this body and smash it down onto the shingle, toss it onto the stones, toss it down onto the stones again. Toss it again. The body drags against the shingle dragging it under, drags itself out of the water, and as it does so the water pulls the shingle away from underneath it so there is nothing to grip on to. Nothing is holding. Nothing except the wall of sea pounding downward.

Or

I can't walk. Trying, failing to pee, failing to pee standing over the toilet, standing over the toilet when a contraction comes, contraction over the toilet legs braced, legs braced baby's head lowers, lowers right into the bladder I'm trying to void. Can't walk.

I'm not pushing. It's pushing. Pushing is happening. I am guttural. I am a point in the throat. I am a point at the base of the throat. There. Making sound. There's this grunting rising out of me out of my throat but it isn't mine. It's not my throat. It's my chest, my ribs, my diaphragm, the whole upper anatomy grunting making noise not deliberate but mechanical, like the grinding of a machine, and with the grunt comes the pushing, the bearing down of the lower half, below the ribs, grinding downward and pushing grunts upward.

I am no longer human. All human-ness has fled. I am noise. I am cogs grinding. Or. I am cow, heaving out calf. I am skin, I am muscles rippling with the heaving. I am pig grunting in birth exertion.

Between these pushes that are not the pushes I had thought to make but pushes that are happening to me, doing without my doing, a voice is making words at me far away sound is shaping words and *slow now slow down now slow now slooooowww down* making words *pant now pant pant pant pant paaaahant paaaahant* but not making meaning nothing means beside these noises convulsing right here it's too late too quick out slipping raw rush unravelling out of me wet and falling to be caught behind me.

Still in its waters, which they break before handing *baby* to me, *baby* handed to me through my legs where our shared cord hangs. Through my legs a tiny white blue purple thing. And in my hands so. A face. A body. Impossible. Possible. *Is it a girl or a boy* voices somewhere long ago speak. I don't know. I don't know. There's a gathering of tiny limbs, slippy in my hands.

There's a tiny face, eyes closed, here, a head cupped in my hands.

P O S T P A R T U M

A cheek folds to lie flat on the stretch of bone above the left breast and beneath the collar bone, a minuscule right hand, fist uncurling, meets the cheek on the chest. Skin of infant is crimped against skin of mother. Eyes unopened. Beneath the lids a womby darkness endures: eyes yet unblemished by light.

The malleable body of the baby will harden to a peak, a point at which the world is not too hard on it, nor it on the world.

◆

Infant body hardening into the world and mother body softening back into the world. Now meeting inside out, one hardening, one softening, recovering a shared temperament and temperature, a convivial likeness. After division becoming akin again.

Birthing has contorted both anatomies. The mother's, strung out in lunges, in tensions and torsions of limbs, realised its physical reach and transcended its prior experiential knowledge. The internal body defined its form through resistance. Organs shifted, shape-changed, bracingly renamed the anatomical structure.

Exertion that was nearly a breaking under the force of contractions over and over, folding over, unfolding over again, and opening. This exertion, and with it the deliberate absence of force in the surrender to force as the body contracted inside and out with the pulling, shortening, squeezing of the uterine muscles, the levering of the membranous wombskin off over the foetus, that in this levering up and simultaneous reverberating down of the abdominal muscles, body in expulsion, foetus might descend and rotate through the pelvis.

There, the visible rippling of muscles over the stomach are only the aftershocks of what was an instant before inside. And then the burning. Crown passing through cervix, vagina, perineum,

vulva. Head though soft, fixing its pressure between the legs, and striking hard back against the anus. Tearing that is recallable afterwards but did not differentiate during.

Birthing rewrites the body. Postpartum. Simply that, postpartum stamped on this body, internal and external. (Except not quite so simple, for what is known of the postpartum body, where is it told, where imaged? Not simple at all for I do not know this word, so with the stretching and reknowing of the body comes a stretching and reknowing of language, but slower, slower to come to, for language is not so amenable. So now postpartum means unknown, means exertion and in its wake a softness. Postpartum means here, right here, the memory of what was, now slack in the softness and soreness of what is.)

The being that traversed the internal body is as if an organ turned out upon the exterior. Except not, there is no residue of its internal life, and the infant's skin though crumpled, so swiftly comes to resemble the mother's, it colours up, the blue white purple of born thing is soon pink and oh! already familiar in its fleshiness. What was so intensely on the inside is now so rightly on the outside. With the shedding of the filmy sack that contained it in its saltwater world, puckered skin meets air. A cough, a cry as mouth opens not to water, as throat fills with substance dry not wet, as liquid-perfused being becomes air-suffused, and as quickly loses its adeptness at floating, at umbilical breathing. Yes, aqueous being swiftly becomes a creature of soil, bipedal, and so soon will it too come to words.

The blue-grey coil of breathcord is no longer pulsing, now cut.

◆

Writing about the birth I realise how fitfully I recall it, how difficult it is to describe something in which I was both author and witness. I see how the tropes work to make the birth story legible, to tether it to reality. It seems contradictory, this need to impress the rules of narrative onto lived experience to make it more convincing. But I see that I rely on it, to enable me to write it at all. I rely on symbols, metaphors, figures of folktale and myth.

I keep thinking about that Fairy Godmother figure of obstetrics, *The Knitting Midwife*. The midwife who sits, with-woman, during labour. Unobtrusive, she sits, knitting away. Knitting away, she only intervenes in the birth process when absolutely necessary. Knitting midwife like one of the three Fates, like Clotho perhaps, spinning the thread of life, presiding over the birth of mortals, apportioning life at the gates of the world. Thinking about her helps me make sense of it.

◆

Not yet here. No longer I, not yet she, nor even you. The blood of the umbilical stump and that globular placenta slumped in a bowl in the fridge, are all that remains of what was before. The gauze caul melts in its own waters amid the scrapes of blood and internal body still on the ground to be mopped and scrubbed and soaked and eventually all stains are removed.

◆

It's easy to forget those parts that fall outside of the main narrative. There's labour and giving birth, there's a baby, and then there's motherhood. The pivotal moments. But there's a strange interim period between birthing and mothering. Labour is divided into three stages: the first stage of labour is that when contractions begin until the cervix is fully dilated. The second is from full dilation until the baby is born. The third stage, the one sometimes missed, is the birthing of the placenta.

There had been blood and waters spilling and midwives careering around with these tiny absorbent mats as if they could contain something of birth on an A3 sheet of paper. *There is severe blood loss, do you consent to Syntocinon and the manual removal of the placenta?* They'd asked. I was lying on blankets flecked with swabby bits of body and fluids of all kinds. *Yes.*

The tugging on the cord. The feeling of it giving, inside. The fear that the cord won't hold. Reluctant, the slow detaching within. Then ooching out: the placenta. Heaving lobey mound red, blue, black, shiny.

No, before that cutting the cord. *Dad take baby. Skin to skin.*

In her kind hands D had bathed me, washed me all over, while C had written pages of notes. A birth story that I have yet to get my hands on. I was unable to pee, so D inserted a catheter into my urethra. Then I lay on the bed in the centre of the room while she prepared a kit to suture the third-degree tearing. Holding a torch between her teeth she injected around my perineum then pressed together the shreds of skin with her fingers. Then she started to sew.

I am a body on a bed, with a bag of urine, pooling blood. *Nearly there now,* D says. We both want out. My hips are wide, my knees falling open. *Nearly there now*, she says again. No stirrups, no bright lights, these are not hospital conditions. *Nearly there.*

We are to be suspended in perpetual limbo between sutured and unsutured, *Nearly there*, between labouring woman and mother, *Nearly there*, prostrate on the bed unable to move. Only the back and forth of the thread which is some new agony, only the friction back and forth through the layers of skin of the vulva and the perineum, *Nearly there.* Only her hands eternally slowly busy with the needle. Only mine unoccupied, *Nearly there now.* Only my two hands on my stomach, fingers crunching together as distraction, *Nearly there*, flat on my back, *Nearly there,* inert. *I just have to tie the knot now.* Only the protracted wrapping of end of thread over end of thread. Only the pulling and tightening and pulling into a knot, the pulling and tightening of the two ends. Only *snip*. A sensation and a sound.

I sat up then. My legs were shaking. Only then, it was a half-thought, only then did I realise that giving birth was the easy bit. *I think I'm going to faint*… I started, and fell back on the bed.

◆

But you are still cold in the air bared to you stripped of the caul-sack, and you haven't yet learnt to shiver, so we press you against my skin, curled up, foetal again, flipped onto the outside, but as if, nearly as if, still inside.

You across my chest and beneath you the sag of stomach that was, only just before, tight with you.

R A P T U R E

A whiteness has come upon being. It might be the snow outside reflecting on the whitewashed walls inside. It might be this bed-ful life, the white of these sheets which suffice for home. It might be something less visible, a state of being. For so long pregnancy had projected a future and now that future is here. The future is now and this is all there is.

Still quiet, still grub, you sleep, your skin against mine, so that we aren't yet two but one from another excavated. When you do wake, with a glug of breath, a squeezing of eyes, a part-opening of one eye, a pulling of limbs outward, when you do wake, I express two or three fatty droplets of yellow colostrum onto my nipple, which we draw up into a syringe and press into your mouth. Your stomach is the size of a walnut.

The daily midwife visits ease us onto the far side with practical tips on positions to feed (side-lying, cradle, rugby ball, laid-back), on healing the tearing (witch hazel), on the bleeding (ongoing), on watching for signs of infection (smell, temperature, pain), on bearing the sting of urination (simultaneously pouring a jug of warm water over the vulva), of defecation (dates, prunes), on hydration, food, iron, rest. Palpating my stomach they check that the uterus is shrinking back.

We have entered a new time. Our present is ongoing, marked only by your age, first in hours, then in days. Time is a tally.

On day four a midwife manhandles my nipple into the back of your throat. You latch on, surprised that this too is possible. The syringes are put away.

On day five my milk comes in and my breasts swell with a burning tautness that can only be relieved, and then never quite, by your feeds.

Propped up on pillows, you between us, we eat plates of toast and honey and drink mugs of hot chocolate, before dawn.

By day thirteen you have regained your birth weight. Weight lost in the first tarry excretions of meconium that your stomach held for so long.

By day fourteen the midwives no longer call.

On day fifteen I notice the vases of daffodils, the cards, the gifts wrapped in tissue paper, the daffodils on every surface sending yellow orange green light across the interior of the house. I notice the white walls reflecting this yellow orange green light.

◆

On day eighteen, I give you your first bath. Or rather, I bring you into the bath with me, wet your skin for the first time at eighteen days.

The warm water fits you like a second skin, as I knew it would, baby born in its waters. Wet, your skin is slippery, treacherously so. I daren't move. But you do and somehow you are once again on my breast and we are once again warm body curved around warm body, now slunk together in a vat of warm water.

You are already filling out your wrinkles, swelling to fit your creased newborn skin. Your cheeks too have filled out. Your cheeks are muscles thickening with all the pumping they do.

My eyes drift away from your body to puzzle my own body. My new body. The pregnant fullness has given way to a draping shape, as if my skin is too big. Silver lines dimple at my hips and over my breasts. I discover creases at the top of my stomach where the belly once rose, which now crinkle in towards my cavernous centre: shrunk in on itself, my concave belly button. The only thing that remains of my pregnant body, the body before this one, is the watercolour stripe of *linea nigra* that still crawls vertically across my stomach.

Your belly button has formed now. Your skin knots at your centre. For eight days a blue plastic clip and a browning stump of umbilical cord recalled our physical connect, remembered those nine months when we had fed and breathed together, or you through your stomach, through me breathed. The stump fell off, still clamped in its blue clip and we put it in a box somewhere to find again one day: blue plastic clip with gnarled stump of cord the beginnings of your inheritance and the point at which you took your first breath.

◆

Day 31. Month one.

We inhabit a congested now, punctuated only by you. We fulfil a set of tasks, mechanically, on repeat. Days and nights are only distinguished by how much light comes through the windows. All other demarcation falls away.

I am a blur of task enacting. I am in response to you. I am unaware of you. I notice you. Again, again I notice you. Your presence precipitates my awareness of you. I am part unseeing and part seeing sharper than I have ever seen.

◆

Your eyes lock on mine. Your eyes hold mine like my eyes have never before been held.

You look at me. Never before have I been looked at. You see me as I have never been seen. And I offer myself to your looking as I have never offered myself before, just as you give yourself to mine. There is no limit to our shared looking.

Your eyes are open. Your pupils career in opposite directions, and ever so slowly. They are a deep indigo, but with light they will pale to a translucent sky blue and they will then gather browns and greens to form a final colour.

I know you too well to represent you. Your grimaces that were I not to know would disturb me. But you are not strange.

I pull you to me, to feed, to feed again, half asleep we change your nappy, with bowls of warm water and cotton wool wash your bottom, your outsized vulva. That virulent yellow shit that like

pollen stains everything it falls on. The sweet, nutty, buttery spray of your shit. I pull you to me again to settle you to sleep. Your toothless mouth clamps my breast.

Or you sleep between us so as not to fall out.

And I wake looking for you, to your cry, and your cry establishes you right here hooked under my arm in that contorted sleeping position we have already worked out. My torso a bough of shoulder and arm above you, your head in the crook of my underarm, that you might latch on with only the slightest manoeuvre.

We are giddy with you, we wipe up your posset again and again we answer your cries. On a sheepskin on the floor your fists uncurl to reveal your secret palms. We are in your thrall. Your legs are splayed, your belly is wide and flat. You froglike.

With this we fill a day.

Or we wake dripping, the bedsheets wet from a feed that wasn't taken.

I am drowsy and slightly high from sleep deprivation, from feeding you, from your/my love, from dehydration.

We know your limbs so well, the fat starting to chub around your wrists, your violinist's hands, those fingers you stretch and spread, transfixing your own gaze. We know you so well. Never will we know you.

You are swaddled tight, a chrysalis on the tabletop, your eyes flicker across to the spring light playing through the windows, to the milk bottles on the windowsill keeping cool. Your arms push out of this cocoon to begin to grab at the air. Your arms through the air in swathes, your perspective not yet attuned to this world.

Is it milk, this fast-cooling wetness around me, these sticky pools in which I have woken, slightly shivery?

It is air you grab with your searching hands.

◆

Sleep doesn't resemble any sleep I have known but is a falling in and rousing as swiftly. Vertiginous. And tonight we fall asleep leaving the candle alight. Your cry wakes us, not for milk, but alert to the flames stealing over the bed. What was it that woke you? The light, the heat, did they sound out, did it smell?

We aren't relieved to have woken, but angry at each other. Battering the flaming duvet, the room fills with smoke as our throats with blame. We remove the bedclothes, the singed duvet cover, the smouldering duvet. The air is thick, our eyes are black. We go out into the night street and stuff the duvet and the covers in the condemnatory dustbin. We hate each other till dry-eyed, dry-mouthed morning.

WHAT BIG EARS YOU HAVE

I glimpse my love. His head is so big now, his face blemished, pockmarked, the pores on his nose are visible, gaping. How have I never noticed before?

My point of reference has changed, to a small, flawless, translucent-skinned being.

The province of motherhood is confined but abundant. The bed is our island, the bedroom our world.

Motherhood is a foreshortening and a rescaling: everything takes place close to and in minute detail. The territory abounds in stuff: soft, pliable, plastic stuff which proliferates, due mainly to its deemed necessity, but also because babies invite celebration and revelry, which is recognised through the giving of many items. It abounds too in minuscule objects, objects invisible to the untrained eye, but hazardous to the eyes of those that reside here, and demanding immediate action: softening, removal, eradication. The topography is heady with precarious edges and ledges, with traps and cataclysmic temptations. In fact, in this regard the landscape does not differ much from previously, but the perception of its inhabitants is so violently altered that it has become unrecognisable. Horizons vanish, walls close in, the outside, the great remembered outside is represented by the windowsill, the doormat. Venturing beyond the threshold of the home is a daunting undertaking, requiring strategic planning and management.

I have lived on islands before, dwelt on patches of land whose edge is visible in all directions. There is something reassuring in knowing that the sprawl of land, the sprawl of humanity, doesn't continue interminably but shelves off into the sea. *The island is the eye of the land*, said the woman, mother of two, with whom I lived on an island off County Mayo, *it gives perspective.*

Living too far inland, I start to lose perspective, I start to feel anxious, breathless, I find it hard to focus my mind as my eyes. *Landlocked* is an apposite term, that's how it feels: locked in, imprisoned. When I visit a new place, I determine quick as I can direction and distance to the sea. Some need of a horizon in order to be able to gauge my bearings, to see straight and to think straight. A need to be able to step back in order to gain perspective, a need for perspective in the external world in order to be able to gain some in my internal world.

What terrified me most about becoming a mother was this: becoming landlocked. I voiced these fears to my island-dwelling friend. *You walk*, she said. *You tie them on to you, and you walk*. She did. Her landscape, inimical to cars, buggies and prams, obliged it. She walked up to the cliffs to check on horses, on newly-planted willows, and down to the shore for flotsam or seaweed. Kids on her back, she climbed stone walls, mended stone walls. She herded, sheared sheep, dug over the fields, cut cabbages, dug potatoes. Her house looks east over the sea towards the Irish mainland. She retained her horizons.

Ironically, islands produce their own kind of imprisonment. Despite their plethora of horizons they can close in. They are sealocked, the return or escape to the mainland is dependent on oft-disrupted ferry services. Living on one, inhabiting that lovely term a *blow-in*, one fails to notice how quickly perspectives shift, and relativise. Cut off from the mainland, island life takes on an alternate reality. It's somehow harder to keep a hold on the self, it looms larger, sounds louder. Yes, in fact perspective is hard to come by on islands. One grapples, I think, with a similar disorientation to when landlocked.

◆

My stomach pulls as I watch you falling from the table, wrenches as I picture the door trapping your fingers, as in my mind your unsteady head swings against the doorframe, as you roll off the chair onto the pamment floor. I am queasy with imagination. With the thud of you that hasn't even the strength to hold up your head. My mind is quicker to construct scenarios than reality is to deny them. The potential horrors proliferate.

I double back and forth between the heady present and the imagined future.

Only in sleep does my excessive attention begin to drift and the drift is so violent I wake searching the bedclothes for you. You here beside me.

You are also caught in this fear. As you slip into sleep, lying still on your back, your breath slurs, your limbs shudder then relax, then you jump and your arms flail outward – you are falling through

air and you are not being caught. You wake in terror. And so it is each time you fall asleep, so I tighten the swaddle, or learn to lie beside you, my hands stilling your arms and legs, the pressure on your arms and legs reassuring you that you are contained.

This drifting of attention colours my dreams. They are a frenzy of searching for you. Night after night you are lost. Though punctured, they are elaborate dreams, their architecture is one of winding staircases, towering scaffolding, labyrinthine pathways. (In my dreams I charge headlong into my fear of heights, I scale the sides of buildings, I snake along cornices.) They are peopled by prophetic figures and forgotten friends. The premise is the same. On repeat. You are lost, and no one quite knows, and no one quite cares. The vagueness and absence of precision of these figures is in direct counterpoint to my acute need to find you. One has seen you, another says, and you were here and now you are not, deems another. But you are not on the grass lawn they point to, nor in the building where they thought they might have seen you. Sometimes I am so weary I can barely lift my dream limbs to walk, even so I drag myself on. Sometimes I too become vague. I lose my keenness, my sense of direction diverges, I too am wandering, asking, babbling, like the others in the dreams. These are the worst dreams, for in them I have abdicated responsibility. In one I find you by digging under a tree, in another you are being cooked in a pan by an old friend.

◆

Sound takes on different resonances here. In this supersoft too-close too-cluttered landscape the acoustic is altered. Sound doesn't move beyond itself as it once did, it doesn't reverberate, distort, sing, nor trill, it isn't carried here as it is on air or through sea. It stalls, stops. Stumped, I am on edge, awaiting the return, my body bent towards the echo, my ears stretching to the sound that should come back. It does not. Here, I long for sound to project itself forwards and backwards. No. My ears are as if thick with water. Noise is just noise and sometimes I don't know if it's inside or outside of me. Sometimes I don't know if it's you or if it's me.

But sound is also shriller here, and my hearing amplified. I can hear every creak, every step, the draught through the walls, the tap running upstairs, your breath across the room. Your screams penetrate my skin, my bones, my blood. Sound has become compact. It makes physical impressions on my body.

In not projecting itself forward sound ceases constructing any sense of a future. I await some manifestation of time continuing on its previous rhythm, its onward progression. But the closing down of space is also one of time. The terrain of motherhood resides in an endless now. *It's just a phase,* outsiders say. *It's just a phase*, they tell me. But this, the current moment, does not offer a future version of itself, the *phase* is all there is. This unforgiving, anechoic state of present tense is all there is.

◆

It is 10pm. It is 11pm. It is 2am. It is 3am. It is 4am. You don't sleep, you scream. You rage at my breasts, at the milk. You flail. You scream. Your body is a petulant ball, your arms are raised, your fists curl in fury. 10, 11, 2, 3, 4. Pull on jeans over pyjamas. Strap you into a sling. Wrap a coat around both of us. 10, 11, 2, 3, 4. Through the unlit streets and down the sunken road to the woods and back. Repeat. 10, 11, 2, 3, 4. The black road. The bend by the church, walled in on either side. The solar LED lights illuminating the graves at head height to the right, and to the left, filmy acres of cow parsley, which glitter on moon-filled nights. (The same gravestones we had scoured for baby names when heavy with pregnancy. Squealing names like love poems across the graveyard.) 10, 11, 2, 3, 4. Trying to keep my mind on the tangible. To perfect my loping walk, my crooning. 10, 11, 2, 3, 4. As if the clock might make sense, impose order.

After the graveyard the road opens to the sky. On some nights the clouds are low and tuck around us. On others of these nights of chronic nightwalking, the moon sheds light to reveal the sheep grazing, and casts the shadows of the trees across the field. There are the shrieks of a barn owl, of the disturbed pheasants, or mostly it is silent and I am singing something in an attempt to lull you out of your screams, so no, it isn't silent, what has brought me outside is your ferocious crying that I can't quell. Superstition piles on top of ritual: if I walk at this pace (fast) stretching and beating my legs into the ground in a drumming rhythm, while singing *Cockles and Mussels* or whatever inadequate song I know by heart; if I keep the pace, the rhythm, you'll go out. If I get the sequence right: the temperature, the clothing, the beat of my feet, the chant of the song, on entering the woods, where the trees shut out the sky above us and as quickly the wood closes down on us, so the singing is now a warding off, *alive alive oh*, you might sleep. If I've got the sequence

right you'll be off by the time we've reached the church, but sometimes I have to repeat the back and forth until on reaching the woods a third time your breath has quickened into sleep, your eyes have closed, your limbs sagged.

Home. Whether to remain like that, you strapped to my chest. Whether to try and remove you, the sling, lie you down. Terror of startling you into waking. Terror of your cries beginning again. Crying to which the breast, our shared language, is not enough, is not an answer, was perhaps even the problem I later came to think. But it was the only answer I had then. The breast, the night loping.

◆

If you fear hurting your baby, leave it in a safe place, take yourself away.

Is this what is written in the manuals, or are these the soft words spoken between mothers?

I am with the mother who puts a coat over her pyjamas and wraps her child in a blanket, who puts her purse and her house key into her pocket, who leaves the house to await the night bus at the end of the road. This mother who sits with her baby on the bus all night long so as not to be alone with it. I help her with her coat, her shoes. I remind her to take her bus fare, her key.

I am with the mother who rings her neighbours' doorbell, just to sit at another kitchen table. Who gives her child to her neighbour to take it away a while, an hour, a few. Who crumples at her neighbours' table. Neighbours she has only spoken to once before, when she moved in next door, pregnant. Were we neighbours she could sit at mine.

I am with the mother who puts her screaming baby in the cot, closes the door and takes herself away.

◆

Born in membranes, the midwife's sparse discharge notes remark.

The membranes didn't rupture and only on being caught behind me by the midwife were they broken with a sharp hook, a tear and then the waters flooded. It wasn't waters I was concentrating on then, but the infantbody in my hands, its tiny face, its slick of hair. I was yet to perceive how weighted with metaphor the terminology of labour was, yet to know that this rupture foreshadowed another.

R U P T U R E

To a cry waking.

Beside the bed crouching last night's jeans standing on their foot cuffs standing there and crumpling upward
rooting for me for my body hands pulling
and at the foot cuffs these wrinkles wrinkling forward to the knees
tiny nails catching
all in washed black denim
droplets of blood rising from where your waving hands
nails not yet hard
nails is the wrong word for these papery skinslips at the tips of your fingers that score my washed black so along the whole length of the seams rising upward in crouching shape upward and across these seams making pleats the original black dye is still visible but only at the seams so sharp there and then washed blackness like faded
just the song of birds outside the pink slant of light across the room
on the pillow the light just above your head
through wear
grab for me
I guess it didn't wash out at the edge I mean
curled on your side alongside my cross-hatched chest
lips screwing up you
textures of linen coarse
fists of flesh
cotton then the flakey plastery whitewashy walls
however regularly I cut your nails these fine blood wounds
whites pinks in the sun
lacing my chest
morning then is it day again is a day starting
and to cut your nails its own hazard
squeal indignant
pinkness playing

your baby-grow is that sort of towelling material not chenille
squeal
dawn pinkness already fading but through the glass the light catching
flail
nappy to change burp before a proper feed dress
catching in a square dance in the corner of the room above the bed now
sit up and wind to feed
risen from the pillow the light
smooth and flat the bald patch at the back of your head where pate meets sheet
Terry towelling
the light refracting through the glass sort of wavy not straight not machine made but blown into a cylinder or disk then rolled and cut into panes you have gone quiet these tiny panes held together by lead cames came is the word for handmade lead bars that hold the rectangular panes in place where here rectangular takes on a gentler sense of the word where the lead is wonky too and the windows no longer quite shut on their casements but the number of windows I am told across the front of this sixteenth century townhouse suggests richness in the day back in the day the day beginning the edge of leaves of buildings pavements lampposts what? something catching light and shade to etch these light dark scenes across the wall and some of the panes have the makers' initials scratched into them a scrolled EW an FR and these windows a filter to the day that is beginning again and the light that catches in the flaws and bubbles of this flaw-filled glass is lighting a murmuration across the back walls of the room and you are watching it your eyes are actually following it as if it were a murmuration as if it were birds flapping starlings a body a host of through the sky a rookery or something I have seen once seen at dawn once been woken like that by birds the noise first filling the sky waking thinking I was dreaming in my nightshirt I crept out to the garden in someone else's house and stood under a whitened sky filled with black birds tumbling so many that it wasn't the tumbling birds I could see but the patches of white between them rising upwards with the call of birds this noise of so many calls undistinguished just one churning sound and the white patches of sky rising and your hands are waving now towards those illusions of life
must do the washing get dressed I'd like a
there's a chance with another feed you might sleep
for forty minutes the forty minutes of a sleep cycle that you now can't push through beyond
on the bed that's if
from the French tiré drawn out tirer to draw out the little cotton loops on one side of the fabric

paw at my breasts
if I manage to slip away ease my nipple out of your mouth from between the clamp of these first two teeth on your lower jaw one cutting after another just before four months old
but also to pull and also to shoot
or scream and run
still the socks there one flat sock imprint of my toes in the cotton toes of the socks wearing thin folded at the knuckles of the foot and crushed beneath the jeans visible at the base of the left leg 32/34 thirty two waist thirty four leg at the knees falling back to the hips collapsing to the floor this crushed half body
crouching by the bed night
you grabbing
after night crouching there awaiting dawn zip undone
inhabited only by day
where are the nappies
mould of a body shape of pants hanging in the crotch and slipping down one gaping leg
daffodils no longer in season and in their place
nothing
some time clean the house do the washing-up make some food
some time a cup of tea
but also a companion in this attendant crouching form alongside the bed
get up change your nappy change your clothes
slick of regurgitated milk at the undone waistline of the jeans
powdery now
your eyes mouth hands announcing your readiness to start the day
like the crumbling white streaks across the sofa
Today I
time is a tally again time is a tally of
the reek of curdled milk on all my clothes on my skin
in the rolls of fat at your wrists beneath your chin behind your ears
shit yellow like mustard and never quite containable
might just yank the nipple away
and just the yellowing of everything a general corroding of whites so swift
the insidious corrosion
kick then sling the 112 days of jeans knickers socks under the bed

the nursing vest the shirt
(if it's a shirt the buttons are done-up wrong a t-shirt it's inside-out)
where they can die
scam like the detergent ads like the like the like the all the fucking
the pretty pictures
run turn on the shower hot and fast and
you on the bed
you in pastel Terry towelling
wailing now
and now you might roll now four months old you could roll
shower running run back to lift you and so steadily (see how I am steady!) place you on the bathmat wailing
soap and need a scrubbing brush to scrape all this off my skin to get back to my skin to remove this clammy shapeless way of being from my skin not just skin it seems to have seeped through my flesh into my bones a thickness there the water is too hot but it's noisy and scald me scald me sharpen me into sense into being what being used to be retrievable under the noisy run of this hot water a limitless stream of being a body righted by the heat give me something abrasive to resurrect this body that is less known right now than its denim mould on the floor to right this anatomy the lungs compacted in a closed cee of the spine the rib cage shutting down neatly on the stomach the sway of pregnancy departed the backward tilt now a concavity in the forward bend of tending feeding lifting carrying in the breathless attention to you, so tiny, the too hot of the water pounding the shoulders to a softness melting back into tenderness under the water

and when scrubbed warm wrapped in a towel I come to find you silent now splayed on the bath mat beneath the rising steam
your tears have gathered to form a puddle in your ear

◆

And then, only then, the word *relentless*.

Today, I

Today, and *I*, the *today*, the *I* slip, skid around
without the meaning they once had
seemed to have

Today I, am hungry thirsty tired I am so fucking weary of, of… of 112 nights without sleep charging around in answer to your whims, you always on my breast, you

I can't blame you, the curl of your fingers, your eyes on me, the release as my breasts empty one side then another into the neat clasp of your mouth, your warmth against me, your skin on my skin, you into my skin tucked so.

Though you will blame me.

◆

Abdicates mopes hurls plates at 9-5 man at I'll sleep in the spare room man flings glasses of water begs cajoles hugs the legs of 9-6 8-7 man spits hits learns to swear learns to act nostril flare harpy and claw and smash to slam doors to walk out one finger two fingers one palm stops sleeping stops eating keeps feeding child back curving skin sagging no one asks are you okay no one says you're not okay stop complaining says 7-7 man stop moaning you're always tired wants to bite tear apart I have to work tomorrow man smother pastoral scene man pastoral dream man

◆

At the sink the vases waiting to be washed clean. Slurry of brown green daffodil stalks in their base. Trumpets yellow white papery browning falling. A gentle stench now the visitors no longer visit.

◆

So softly sweetly drawn into this.

Scam.

◆

His and Her words are fragments, they are shards of glass. He and She, shards of selves. At any instant words might spin out, fling broken glass around the room. They become more and more careful with what they say, learn to mark the edge as it closes in on them. I don't want to talk about this, He says She says. Their vocabulary diminishes as each word is imbued with its aftermath. Still the edge closes in on them. Still these glassshards at any moment lacerating the air between them, shattering further. They avoid catching each other's eyes, they avoid talking for fear talk might ricochet. They lie in separate beds licking their wounds.

◆

It's not thrilling any longer. There's no scintillating edge to the rows, they don't release the adrenalin they once did. They're just a weary repetition of the scripts both know by heart.

Somehow the child still.
But they've lost sight of her.

S L O P

You've slipped into a state of a-chronicity.

. . .

Your apprehension of sequence itself is halted. Where you have no impression of any succession of events, there is no linkage between them, and no cause. Anything at all might follow on from any one instant. You are tensed for anything – or, equally, are poised for nothing.

. . .

Your very condition militates against narrative.

— Denise Riley

Episodes resurface and crystallise here in sharp-edged detail. Snatches of conversation that my memory has trawled. Instants that have hounded me and refused to be repelled. To recall, to write about those first days is to encounter a series of apparently unconnected episodes, objects, words, that rise up from the blur. These shards break through with an overwhelming acuity: extra bright, extra loud.

Yes, it is said of unresolved trauma that it inhabits a present tense, that it is re-experienced in the present moment as though no time has passed. That there is nothing to distinguish then from now. That memories of trauma are housed in the senses but don't obey the rules of temporality. My trauma was minor, commonplace, the term's too big for it. It was the everyday trauma of motherhood, of finding the life and the self I knew eviscerated. It was an evisceration, a devastation. A laying waste. It was chronic sleep deprivation and it was the struggle of coming to terms with the fact that all the love, all the joy had found its form in this, in resentment, blame, bitterness, anger. It was the trauma of ousted first love, of innocence lost. The trauma of feeling divested of autonomy, of selfhood.

Motherhood too seems to inhabit a temporal variation from the norm. It has a similar insistence on the present tense. The present moment rises up with an immediacy in startling counterpoint to the indecipherable ongoingness. The urgency of care repeatedly, arrythmically, breaks in on the soft focus of days, nights without sleep.

The present tense is the temporal frame of attention, before that instant of noticing has gained distance, been reflected on, rationalised and understood. And without my forcing it, the writing too seems to be obeying this same urgency. Almost unwittingly, or of its own accord, the story seems to have discarded the laws of narrative in favour of those of photograph. For in motherhood there is no time for reflection.

The impression I am left with of those first months is a series of episodes without clear links set against the mundanity of the day to day. Like islands of memory those episodes rise up with no apparent connection between them.

Perhaps it is for the reader to make out the patterns, to firm up the tenuous connections. Or, perhaps the reader too has to agree to inhabit this defamiliarising terrain, where meaning is made not of narrative, but otherwise.

◆

She takes a knife at me, a friend announces offhand when round for supper. I take a stance, sound imperious, remind him of the scene in *The Archers*: *The knife, dear friend, is a woman's only possible recourse when faced with a controlling partner*. Conversation shifts, turns quickly to the woodcock on our plates, head intact, eyes roasted black, neck uncannily contorted so the beak skewers the legs in what seems a cruel mockery of this bird, so swift in flight. Its innards, minus the gizzard, have been scooped out with a teaspoon, fried with butter and brandy and then spread on the toast on which the bird sits. The knife is forgotten.

I am already used to the slop of milk, this new-but-familiar spilling over, the breast pads never quite sufficing. It does not offend. And we're among friends. I don't notice the wet patches forming on my shirt while you sleep on the sofa. Only their horrified faces.

I mash a banana in a pleasingly shapely wooden bowl. I lift up my T-shirt, take my left nipple between my fingers and squeeze some milk into the bowl. I sit you on my lap and our pretty bowl between us. I lift a fingerful of mashed banana up to your mouth, I touch it onto your tongue, *mmmmm,* I say, *mmmm, yummy,* I say, I rub it onto your gums. It slides out of the side of your mouth.

A row flares up between a couple when we are over for lunch. We're not sure whether to intervene or to leave: we fluctuate. I take over the cooking. This time it's beef, a massive lump, at least 5lb, a fan oven. Mustard, garlic, an onion, olive oil… I'm improvising. Two hours later the beef rests on a chopping board. The board has a rim, a sort of empty moat around its edges, to catch the juices. The moat overflows in what seems to be an insane, unnecessary flooding: how could that much blood spill from that much meat? Laptops, papers, toys, crayons, nothing is immune to the blood spreading over the white melamine surface of the island unit.

I buy you a soft plastic spoon. In yellow. I steam pears and blend them. I offer a spoonful to your mouth. You look perturbed. I add baby rice. I add cinnamon. When you see the yellow spoon you close your lips tight shut.

A painter who is working in the studio across the street and her partner join us for supper. You are on my lap. We adults are eating pasta with thyme and walnuts. You are latching on and off my breast. Only when her partner's shirt is really dripping, only when everyone else has noticed, do I register the arc of milk spewing across the table.

Sometimes I am playful, the spoon is an aeroplane, a train, I make noises, I soar around the room. Sometimes you gurgle with laughter and right then, just as you are laughing, I shoot the spoon into your mouth. Sometimes you swallow a bit. But you prefer to answer my deceit with full regurgitation. Mashed parsnip reappears, unchanged, bathed in all of today's milk.

It is my mother who suggests I cover up when breastfeeding in the café of a department store, my mother who unties her scarf from where it is knotted at her neck and deliberately spreads it over my breast and over your head.

Sometimes when you are crying I take the opportunity to spoon the food in between your open lips.

I give you ricecakes to gum on. You suck the edges before tossing them on the floor. You will only consent to those baby crisps that look like giant Wotsits and are made of puffed carrot. They dye the skin around your mouth a violent orange.

Outsiders can't see the lacerations we are trailing around with us.

Now I look at those occasions, the hints that all does not hold as well as it looks from the outside, at the precarity of those and almost every manifestation of parenthood I have known, as episodes of coming out. Exercises in exposing the interior narrative. Comings out as rapidly denied by our closing down of the conversation: we don't want to know. Or, better put: we ourselves are so precarious we can't hold your precarity too.

I read into other mothers' casual comments and I begin to see that they too are quietly walking around with their lacerations, quietly dripping.

◆

Do you row, asks parenting on her own. *You must do; I have the most god-awful rows with myself.* Another, *Do your rows get violent? Ever thought of channelling that energy elsewhere?* Another tells me that she typed *regretting having children* into Google, that she discovered communities. Another asks, *children or career, children or career*? I'm pissed off, then, when she asks, I say *career*. I forget the other half of the sentence, the necessary qualifying part, the *I love my child, but*…

The first tells me about her shrink, in her eighties, really sexy, bright, directive, velvet chairs. Gives me her number. The velvet chairs do it. I ring her up.

Of course, those questions aren't really valid. You're already in it. They're truth or dare questions that should only be asked in the hypothetical. Any regret isn't consistent, in most cases the regret flickers, often entirely absent but when it's there it's all there is.

Now the question is not so much what, nor which, but how to make this work.

I leave a message with the shrink, imagine an elegant elderly woman listening from the arm of a velvet chair. She rings back, leaves a message when I am putting you to bed. I like her voice. She says to call back after half nine, she's up late. I'm not. I leave a further message the next morning,

then she leaves another. I wonder if this will be my therapy, conducted through blind answerphone messages, if I will start to reveal more and more to the void of the answerphone.

◆

Ours is a state of vigilance, purged of dream. It's the hard grind of the concrete, hard on the touch, the feet, the knees. Motherhood effects a cataclysmic undoing, language and reason as previously known depart. It upends grammar, tense and syntax. Time and space likewise take on new shapes. All the scaffolding that hitherto kept things standing falls away.

I find myself wondering about a tendency to pathologise, to call these divergent states of being that mothers are propelled into, *illness*. I wonder too about the rigidity of language, of reason, time and space. I wonder if the texture of motherhood is not one of symptoms but one that demands a reconfiguring of the structures within which we previously lived. Motherhood restructures the known, restructures reason, it changes utterly. Vulnerable, emotional, scary, unreal, yes. But not an illness, and perhaps the illness lies rather in a society unable to tolerate the realities of mothering, unable to acknowledge the varying and often contradictory maternal emotions as legitimate responses to caring for a child, and unable to support mothers in their work of mothering. Moreover, a society unwilling to rewrite the flawed, and troubling representations of mothers on which it resides.

All I want to say is that it's much easier to call it illness than to acknowledge the very frightening edge along which a mother is constantly treading, constantly preserving her child, and herself, constantly not-falling. I guess it's called coping, just, and it's not outside of motherhood, nor outside of mothers, it's inside, there, or here, folded up in the very real, mundane, everyday thick of it. Just here, like these scraped knees.

Motherhood like labour asks of me to endure, but also to yield.

◆

I'm not angry any more. This anger, here, is just to have a voice, to speak against silence. How much easier to be angry than to speak my truth. To recognise how cramped we both were by these new roles, Mother, Father, that were foisted on us and yet had so little to do with us.

I was disappointed though to miss the velvet armchairs.

L E X I C O N

One moment, walking. The next – am I real?

— Claire Jarvis

Suddenly, time falters.

First, the head spins, overcome with a slight vertigo. It is nothing; but then the spinning goes wild, the ears start to ring, the earth gives way and disappears, one sinks back, goes away… Where does one go?

— Catherine Clément

Loss of self. It's a common complaint. But where does one go? For here, this I, is this not a self? But yes, something had slipped. Something had been dislodged and where it had been there was now a blank. It's hard to be exact, hard to get at what it was that was lost, now as then. An absence of lexicon, a lack of terms to get at this lived thing played a part. Without words to put to it, it was hard to fathom. And that too was the most salient absence: words.

I had a sense of something occurring right at the very centre of me, an occurrence that showed traces on the surface, etched itself, I thought, onto my skin in relief – indents, splits, wrinkles, dimples, depressions, concavities. A sort of caving in that was visible on the outside, but what was visible was only the slightest suggestion of what was happening on the inside. Where had I gone?

Modes of relation to others and to the world had shifted, and modes of attention had shifted too. The language with which I knew, named, understood my self, was proving to be deceptive, flawed, inexact.

What was missing was not my body. It was still there. Fleshy. Still here. What was missing was this thing that I'm trying to get at. Something of the order of words. Or, despite all these words, being lost for words.

I had lived in and through books and the books I had read had prepared me for living, but nothing, none of those books had prepared me for this, for this thing I was in: motherhood. I hadn't read about it, not as it really was. This time it wasn't folktale I looked to but essays. I needed concepts, I needed language. I needed a means of thinking and writing about this, about motherhood, about loss.

◆

I start to dredge up books that have done this before. Mothers that have sought to testify to this effaced experience, to this experience of effacement. Tried to voice this unspeakable thing, this thing that seems to evade language, to shun language or to expose language's failings.

I notice how books don't enlighten through putting words to the unknown, but rather through giving form, better form, better shape, to thoughts, to modes of seeing and being that are already deeply familiar. They enlighten because they elucidate, clarify and give words to what I can't quite.

Vehement, I turn down the corners of pages, I underline, I highlight. I start to memorise passages, copy them out. My notebooks become cut-and-pastes. I overlay others' words on my own. I test them out, out loud, in company.

I like the taste of their words, permissive, provocative. I use them more than my own. Is it because their words come easier, are truer? Or just to not feel so alone. Just to hear the voices of others beside me. Or, not so much to acknowledge them as to feel acknowledged. To feel held as much as I hold.

These writers give me terms for the blank that comes, then repeats. Neat little words to stuff in the gap, to stuff the gaps. This way I keep myself tidy.

Sheila Heti calls it *miserly*, but there's something about squeezing oneself in between, filling the gaps, the fissures. There's something strangely expansive in what it gives me, a space in-between. A fissure, in its emptiness, can be so fully inhabited.

Lacuna: an unfilled space, a gap. A missing portion in a book or manuscript. A cavity or depression. From the Latin 'pool', from *lacus* 'lake'.

◆

It wasn't explicit then, eighteen days in, tracing my own pleated, depleted body in the bath, nor in the watery communion that turned pregnancy inside out and placed a body now empty alongside a body it once contained. It wasn't explicit that the knot at your centre marked a loss. Cavity or depression, your very own lacuna. Then, nothing was lost. Only gained. Any flaccidity in my body was discredited by the fullness in my breasts. That fullness. Those nights. The milk sodden sheets. In the bath, the water turning swiftly translucent. Plenitude! Gain!

As for words, the process was one of word gathering: vernix, meconium, latch, let-down reflex… word-gathering in the warm mustiness of having a tiny body alongside mine. Gain, and gain. It wasn't until much later, when the soft mist started to lift, the woozy myopia of months of breastfeeding and sleep deprivation started to dissipate and shards of another reality threw a clarity both welcome and unwelcome at me, that the cavity at your centre, the sag at mine became a metaphor for loss.

◆

Lacuna, lagoon-like, makes of absence something watery and enveloping. By lacuna I am cosseted. Once more enwombed.

I try not to over-think my desire to slip away from motherhood into the water, bath, river, sea, whatever will take me, wrap itself around me, hold me. It is tempting to draw some skewed equivalent between the French *la mer* and *la mère*, to speak of a return to the mother. I think it is much simpler than that. A gentle, momentary forgetting as water obliterates everything else, and then me.

Syncope has the delicious coincidence of being both a medical slip and a grammatical one, a flaw in self and in language. What syncope gives, better than any other term, is the total loss of languaged self that is becoming a mother.

(A shout across the mother and baby group, a recognition, *It's like I'm in a washing machine thrown round and round then chucked out the other side*.)

I don't know how to pronounce it, sometimes giving it a French lilt: san-cop, other times a full Mediterranean twang: seen-cope-ay. Even so, I say it. Hold it there in front of me, with a swagger, my Grecian shield.

And even then, even now, to name what it was that was lost… Rather, to find words that plug the hole, that stop the falling. From Kristeva *caesura* and *lacuna*. From Clément *syncope*. These become shoulders on which to lean, hands which keep me standing when wordlessness threatens to take me down. Lacuna, caesura, syncope to name what I can't.

◆

There used to be an expanse of being right beside this fleshier being, not beside, somewhere within and just as textured. Or, somewhere without, boundless and viscous. It was dwelling there that made living legible. And, I only know of it now because it's no longer here.

And perhaps, perhaps that was my bent, towards the place that stretched, the limitless one. But I wasn't aware how much time I spent there, nor of the tending it took, nor what it demanded of silence and solitude to grow. I wasn't aware how fragile it was, how with my attention elsewhere, I might lose it.

Perhaps I mean daydreaming. Just that. Daydreaming, I miss.

◆

When I look for it, this missing thing, I sometimes glance it. Abruptly foreshortened, with no horizon. Sometimes in its place: fog.

When I stretch my fingers it's dense fog that flares from the ends of my hands. I exude fog. Nor is it a process of hunting through the fog, I learn. Nothing is hiding in the fog. But it is one of

finding tools with which to make pockets in the fog, tiny pockets to nurse and tend like the expanse that was once before. The tools? Words.

Fog is a word.

◆

No. Not daydreaming, not just that. Wordmaking, languagemaking. But languagemaking required solitude, reflection, required a stillness that I could no longer access. I'm not quick, instantaneous, I need time for things to foment, come clear. Those early days of mothering were always in the immediate. Everything required response, not thought.

Writing of it now makes demands of me, to find a language, a grammar appropriate to these experiences.

◆

I imagine a writing that testifies to the shapeshifting of motherhood by its own shapeshifting. I imagine these pages printed on transparent paper so thin that all of them can be read at once. A reading that would sharpen the contradictions, make explicit the absurdity of motherhood, of being in all these states, all these bodies, at once. To announce the simultaneity, the frightening *in extremis* – all this? At once?

I imagine writing that gets at the materiality of the day-to-day experience of mothering. Not *gets at*. A writing that *performs* the shifting grammar, tense, the fragmentation, the blanks, the gaps on the page. A writing that encompasses all the different planes on which a mother dwells, that fluctuates as her attention fluctuates between them. A writing that invokes the being at sea that motherhood so often is, a writing that, like the ground, never quite holds.

◆

What I will pass on to my children: blue plastic umbilical clips, cords still attached, and all these words.

I SAY TO YOU: WORLD

First is it your fist shaped into a soft point. Your fist pointing and with it a cry to draw my attention. This is how you get what you want, you need, what you can't reach nor yet manipulate. On giving you the object I give you its name. I shape the word in my mouth and slowly sound it out. Eyes wide you scrutinise my moving face.

What melancholic tongue is this mother tongue, this gifting of words that don't fit, words that fall short? Why am I giving you language when language as I know it is inadequate?

You understand our words long before you speak them. And you can make animal noises before you make words.

What noise does a pig make?
What noise does a cow make?
What noise does a dog make?

The tireless repetition of this game, where the joy is less the game itself than the surprise each time – my/your surprise that you can make sense of our words, that you have entered our languaged world.

The first word you speak aloud is *Betty*. Your dog playmate comes to visit, and after she leaves you pine. *Beh-teeeee* you lie on the floor, you moan *Behhhh-teeee.*

Who am I to give you language when my grammar is upended by mothering you, when those tenses I once learnt through imitation, those I long used, long trusted, are inexact for the shifting temporality you and I inhabit?

In your mouth you mimic these words I give to the objects, I give to you.

But you don't make words with funny mouth shapes like me. Your words form right back by your back teeth or somewhere in your throat and you carefully make them there and then, like doughy objects, you press them out with your tongue and they spill into the space between us.

Wah du, you say, *wah du*. Water. Though you're only interested in the cup.

You are enumerating your world. Yours is a process of naming, classifying, collecting. With nouns you commit to the world beyond you.

You know the objects of the world by their feel in your mouth, their texture, their taste. But the carrot, the apple, the breadstick, you refuse. Your communing with the world beyond you is limited to words. The idea of letting the world enter your body is repellent to you.

I am relieved to see you don't abide by the rules, you shy away from pronouns as if already conscious of how deceitful, how changeable they are. You refuse the *I*, wary of its rectitude.

But look at the air, I say, *you breathe the air into your body. Look at the milk*, I say, *the milk you drink from my breast*. You look at me surprised. The former you cannot see. The latter is already yours, you tell me, *Mine*, you say, is of your body and absolutely definitely not of the world beyond it.

The breadth of each word is much wider in your tongue: you are indiscriminate in your naming and each word encompasses many others. Daddy is a collective noun meaning human, still accompanied by the pointing hand. Betty is interchangeable with dog. And dog is cat too. Train is ta-ta is car is lorry. *Ta-ta*, you shout with glee.

Then you start to tack words together, string them across the air between us, two, three of them. How many words make a sentence?

And with your words, this process of learning, you make time, and mark its progress.

You refer to yourself by your name only. This you qualify with an adjective or a noun to describe your status or desires. (Hungry, tired, bed, ta-ta.)

But prepositions and conjunctions, those terms of relating, pass you by. You fail to recognise the nuance held in them. You don't appear to care.

The health visitor tells me you won't speak if you don't first eat. *Chewing is imperative for speech to happen,* she tells me. *The child's language will be impaired for life if she doesn't start eating solids*. I try to tell her that you do speak but that you refuse to eat. I try not to cry. You refuse to perform.

It is through words that I know you separate to me. And yet look! how with your words you reach out to me. Words both connect and disconnect us.

In giving you words I mourn the loss of our other languages of milk, of gestures, expressions, yawns and grimaces. The language that only I could read, our common tongue.

Your hand stops pointing, the word suffices now.

But each word is spoken like a gesture, it points and reaches out to touch.

It is a while before I realise that these words of yours remain impenetrable to outsiders. That we are bound together once more in a shared lexicon. And that as you are learning my spoken language so I too am learning yours.

INCY WINCY SPIDER

I had always thought of Louise Bourgeois as mourning her childhood and her mother in her later work, but how she too was a mother, how so much of the mother grows and needles into her work.

— Kate Zambreno

When I was growing up, all the women in my house were using needles. I've always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin.

— Louise Bourgeois

My hands are papery. They have started to catch on my hair, on my clothes. The skin at the edge of the nails is raw. They are long, thin hands, decidedly marked by burns, by other mishaps, disfigured by the day-to-day.

When I touch you, your new skin shies from my old skin.

I rub the cream into your chest, into your shoulders, over your back. You squirm in my grasp. Your skin reddens. I rub the cream over your arms, hands, over your tummy, bottom, between your toes. I rub and rub, oint, anoint, and the action warms my hands and the cream softens my hands. Vigorous, I rub. I too pinken. Then I squirm. I squirm at the feel of the greasy slather of Vick on my chest, and my own mother's hands on my skin, cold and crevassed like sandpaper.

My mother comes to me like this, in snatches. But really, motherhood hasn't brought me to confront my own childhood. I don't feel more daughter, but less daughter, not closer to my mother, but further from. In snatches my mother imparts knowledge, always too late, always unusable by the time she proffers it. The time it has taken to resurface in my mother's memory through the practice of grandmothering has rendered it useless. Like the red patent leather T-bar shoes she proffers, scuffed like hell, the buckles broken. With such pride she hands over these once-gorgeous shoes as if she can't see the scuffs, the splitting straps, the buckles that no longer buckle. No. To her the shoes are shiny and red. She gives them as she first gave them to me, before her still in an OshKosh pinafore. To me, in the days when she was just-a-mother, becoming a mother through buying her daughter the most beautiful pair of red patent leather T-bar shoes in the shop. When she hands over the shoes, her face breaking in smiles, what I notice, more than the unusable shoes,

what I notice are my mother's new hands: against the shoes they are pale and soft, her nails are long and manicured.

◆

If I had gone to see the shrink, would she have solved things for me? If I'd progressed from velvet armchairs to – imagine! – velvet couch, would she have shown me a position in which I could realise my self *and* be a mother? Both? It's troubled terrain: on the couch one is first and foremost a daughter. The mother is not a subject in her own right, but that other against which one defines oneself. She is container, mirror, function. She is object, idealised or denigrated. And perhaps this is the crux of the difficulty of becoming, being a mother: in our imaginary, the mother is not a subject, but an object, not an I, but a she.

Every mother has been a daughter, is in many ways still a daughter. Perhaps to find a way to inhabit the mother, one needs to stop daughtering. Or perhaps it's the opposite, one needs to fully inhabit one's daughter self. I don't know.

◆

I think about this mother daughter problem as we, you and I, stand under Louise Bourgeois' spider, *Maman*. The huge bronze spider that stood for a while inside then outside the Tate Modern, Mummy. I think how a mother is a symbol, a metaphor before she is an agent. She's bound, like a fly in a web, in a plethora of allusions, stories, myths. Not an individual, but a figure of fantasy.

We are all children when standing under Bourgeois' spider, its giant eggsack suspended above our heads. And you and I, we are both daughters. *Maman* is frightening, overbearing, and she's so very fragile. How she crouches high over us, how securely she carries those marble eggs at her frondal base, her spindly legs, how they bend, hear how we call her, *Maman*, how softly we intonate *Maman*.

Bourgeois' work is known for its psychoanalytical inflections and *Maman,* she has said, represents her own mother. But Bourgeois was a mother too and I wonder if her spider could be read as a means of weaving together her daughter-self and her mother-self. The spider first appeared in a drawing in 1947. At the time Bourgeois was a mother of three young boys. She began working on the first spider sculpture in 1994. Her first son had died in 1990. *Maman* was the name she called her mother, but it probably wasn't a word that her boys used to call her, having grown up in English-speaking countries. But she was a *Maman*, as she would have been acutely aware of when making these spider mothers.

Paula Rego's enlarged spider encroaches over *Little Miss Muffet* from behind, in the eponymous print made in 1989. Like *Maman*, the spider is huge, bigger than the human in the image. It has a woman's face, and one of its legs is settled on Little Miss Muffet's shoulder, another sits on her thigh, while the others swing in the air as if about to descend on the child. It's a threatening stance but also a protective one. Little Miss Muffet's head is turned towards the spider, but her eyes are looking out of the picture. She has been surprised by the descent of the *big spider* and appears to looking for this surprise to be acknowledged. Rego's etching too has psychoanalytic nuances, it's linked to Sigmund Freud's understanding of the spider: when it appears in dreams or unconscious representation, the spider symbolises the mother.

Like Bourgeois, Rego was a mother too, a grandmother by the time she made this work, which was for her granddaughter. A gift for her granddaughter, so the work was passed down through the matrilineage just as the nursery rhyme itself tends to be. Rego in fact encountered the tradition of nursery rhyme at the English school she was sent to from the age of ten. In this stance, where Miss Muffet is not quite frightened away, the spider not quite *sat down beside her*, it's the child's eye catching the viewer's that is suggestive of something more.

It seems a dubious position to take, as mothers, to be seemingly reinforcing the psychoanalytic discourses, discourses in which a mother cannot be a subject. These spider mothers appear less as real individuals than the forces a mother stands for, the impulses a mother arouses. The problem with mothers is that they are so weighty with significance, so layered with metaphor, that they can't be seen.

But by giving form to these maternal figures, and injecting them with personal experience, perhaps the artists are not reaffirming the metaphors. Both Rego's and Bourgeois' work is derived from

the personal. Personal experience too, is of course mediated by structures of representation, but their piercing of these symbols recognises the specificity of the individual self. Making them their own, a mother who is both *of* the metaphor and also *distinct from* the metaphor begins to emerge. The suggestion, held in Little Miss Muffet's almost-wink, is that one can't simply ignore the symbols, but that by grappling with and rewriting them, one might demystify them, make one's own meaning.

◆

My mother comes to me one day and says, six months in, six months of grizzling in: *Grizzle, that's the word, it's called grizzling.*

My mouth is filling with these new words. I hear them fall off my tongue several times a day. Grizzle, fractious, posset. What is the worth of these words that I have never used before and will probably never use again? Forget, like my mother did.

I clutch for the old words, clutch for them all but disappeared, and try to recall them to sense. Sometimes I discover them, in my diary, in notes or letters I once wrote. I don't recognise the person writing, nor the words that person uses, I don't recall the thoughts or experiences. I feel absurdly like I am being fooled.

I have started to talk in anecdote. My life is a series of short farcical stories, laugh-provoking tales that make good of the bad. I have become astute at one-line conversations that hold much more than they give away. My humour sharpens alongside my melancholy.

These hands, this mouth, both are strange to me. They are both someone else's and entirely, inexplicably my own.

◆

Much of Bourgeois' work is made with needle and thread, and trying to find that confluence between mother and self, perhaps it is that, a needling, a needling of self into mother and mother back into self, as if needle and thread might stitch the two together, make of them one. Or, quite how hard we have to tug the thread to move from position of daughter to that of mother. Needles knit, they repair, they might also draw blood. As if it has to hurt, a little, this becoming mother.

And needling remembers the itching in pregnancy that came from growing my body around another, at first the band low across the stomach, then on the fall of flesh from the upper arms, the skin just beneath them coming up in red dots, and below the breasts this hot itching, that would pin and needle away, so I would lie unable to lie, unable to sleep, finding respite only by pouring cold water, or ice, melting ice over my swelling needling body.

◆

Something catches the ring on my left hand, it budges and the ring, an instant before no more present than the finger, reveals itself. In its slip the ring that is always there becomes suddenly there. When now I slip it off, I discover my finger indented beneath; the ring has nestled into my finger. Not nestled, merged, and if skin refers to the matter covering the body then this gold band is more skin than it is not.

I cup the ring in my other hand. I notice how even the palms of my hands are furrowed and, who knew, gold was not gold at all but a soft murky yellow, or what power gold has to soften and indent, to harbour the skin it touches from the process of ageing, so that only there does my skin resemble my own childskin, or the skin of my child, as if that ring of skin has been preserved and belongs to a time before the ring was placed on the finger.

These hands are not my hands but those of my mother, in the chewed nails, the ends cracking to bleeding, in their coldness and roughness, I do not recognise them as my own. No, they are not mine, but the hands my mother held out to me as a child. Those hands, still so familiar, are now worn on the ends of my arms. I have yet to claim them as my own.

Removing the ring lets the time it has gathered, its *till death do us part*, seep away. The time seeps away but I am not swept back in time. I am held here, in suspense between the now and the then, time both stops and floods in, and I am here treading water, caught upon a pause. Looking at these hands not mine, and an indented finger, mine the indent. The indent not a disfigurement so much as a recollection of a woman who didn't wear her mother's hands at her wrists.

◆

Look how fragile it is, the spider in your toddler hands, or crawling over your arms. Your delight. How you love the spider. So much so that on waking from your nap you ask, *Where's the spider, Where's the spider gone?* So much so that as you pull off each of its legs, as the already dead spider crumbles in your clutch you sob, *Spider broken, Spider broken*. As strands of leg are crumpled to dust in your hands, you wail. Then, another day, the snag of black thread on the floor is to you, already adept in symbolism, a spider too, is *Scary*, *Spider scary, Mummy*.

Writing too is spidery, is tracing black filaments over paper, tying these strands into words and sentences, is to quote Bourgeois, *a secretion, like a spider's thread*. And a pen too works like a needle, a means of embroidering, of stitching things together, of pulling threads through.

Last time I went to see Bourgeois' work it was her journals I stayed with, the wordy drawing scribbled pages, in black, blue and red. I copied down some lines:

Following the summer trend il y a eu lieu un tangible, [illegible] return à la mère. Hier dans ma sculpture j'ai fait des dessins de seins pressés les uns contre les autres. Il y avait une double attitude to be like a mother to be liked by my mother …

How she slips between languages, from her mother's tongue to her tongue as a mother. *Des dessins de seins,* the phrase as palpable as the image it conjures of hilly breasts pressing piling together in nippled ems to form cursive hillscapes, yes, the double attitude or double-entendre, *dessins de seins*, or, *to be like a mother to be liked by my mother.*

Ems tracing the ems of Mummy, or Maman, but also of mammary, the articulated m m m, or as I have since learnt, the mmmm as the letter em in current primary school phonics is pronounced: it is not the prominent articulated em that begins Mummy or mammary but the withdrawn mmmm of quiet gastronomic pleasure.

Or, so I imagined them, these mammary hills. But pulling up the drawings on the computer today I see the breasts hang, or coagulate, they are oes and ovals, one stuck to another, bulbous, sometimes pendulous, and not the squirming ems or mmmms in a child's scrawl I misremembered.

M Y O P I A

To go off writing, I must escape from the broad daylight which takes me by my eyes, which takes my eyes and fills them with broad raw visions. I do not want to see what is shown. I want to see what is secret. What is hidden amongst the visible. I want to see the skin of the light.

. . .

My nearsightedness is the secret of my clairvoyance.

— Hélène Cixous

I still recall the detail of those windows that we stared out of together, or that I stared out of alongside you: the lead glazing bars, the colours of the old glass, the etched initials, the changing branches beyond. Several rectangles of detail recording life in that ancient house where we lived during the first five years of your life. Detail that sits in counterpoint to the opacity of that period of time.

◆

Trees rippling through old glass. Lead glazing bars segmenting the view.

The tallest have dropped their leaves signalling that the season has changed. The top of the window houses six pen and ink montages of bare branches striking (rippling) across the slow-appearing sky, below them six, twelve blasts of autumn sepia, and much lower the panes frame the last branches, which hold their green. Compositions broken only by the flight of birds or the bluster of wind.

Winter approaches like this: downward. Every year, the light it brings is a surprise. The wall of leaf falls to reveal branches and behind them, sky, sunrise, light. When winter cracks through the green sheen of the previous months the rooms upstairs are suffused with a bright low light, which stays until spring when the trees leaf up once more.

We are twenty months lying on that same bed in the middle of the room, bed still pushed left or right in nights of heavy rain, the same bed, the same room, still feeding here. My nipple still

clamped in your mouth until your eyes slur and your breathing becomes heavy with sleep. Still the effort of peeling my nipple out from between your closed lips and teeth. Still dreading your eyes flickering open, dreading the murmur then cry for me. Still just forty minutes, a sleep cycle, in which to rage around the house, feral with my short-lived solitude, doing nothing in my fervour to do everything. Forty minutes, if that, when I exist without you. (If that is I exist without you?) Forty minute stretches by night too these last nights, your voracious sucking. Barely on solids and snacking on foremilk all night by my side.

◆

What's not apparent in the scene I am sketching is the wildness that was between us, just behind our eyelids.

But a friend glimpsed it. She came by for coffee and maybe I just couldn't make a coffee. Maybe it was my depleted body. Maybe she saw the wildness in my eyes. *Stop.* Maybe it was me putting you to my breast again because I didn't know what else, how else… *Stop.* What else to do. *I can't.* Maybe she saw the fight raging between us. *Yes. You can.* Firm. *Do it together, not against.* Maybe she had been through something similar with her children. *Talk to her, talk to each other.* Wild from no space from you, from you not eating solids, not sleeping, and always on my breast, from my body being yours still, wrecked from lack of sleep. More than that, lost. Beside my self. Outside my self.

That night we slept side-by-side and I wore a polo neck and you clung to me.

The next morning you sat across the breakfast table from me and ate a bowl of porridge. For the first time.

And, having always held you, worn you, I borrowed a pushchair and discovered this space between us. I borrowed a pushchair to walk you to sleep up and down that road that went down then up and no one ever drove down, the banks still thick with blackening dead nettle and when someone

did drive down it, I would have to yank the pushchair up onto those banks. Until you slept. I sang too. Until you slept. Then I rushed home quick as I could just to be alone.

Then the engorgement, the searing pain of overfull breasts. Squeezing off the top in the bath, hot flannels, massage, over three days.

All those days lying on my side, feeding, watching through the lead panes of glass Autumn then Winter's mark stamping the world clearer, sort of defining. Or inside two butterflies battering against the glass, too much sunlight tricking them out of hibernation.

◆

Just as quick the world changed colour, shade and light intensified, shapes took on clear lines. Suddenly I could see! It was as if a heavy lingering fog had cleared. Intensive breastfeeding had held me in chronic myopia. Exhaustion, physical and mental depletion had closed the world close around me: I hadn't been able to see further than you on my lap.

But the limitations of myopia are also its beauty. Early motherhood, the stumbling through the glass that had always held me on the near side, had its own viscosity. Only ever able to grasp the specific, the particular, the near. Unable to disentangle the contrived from the real.

Myopia is the sharpness of the imagination, against the vague out-of-focus world beyond. It is the secret close-to world that doesn't stretch far and that others are not party to. Feeding was our shared language. It was our reluctance to quit our dyad. Like that no one could step in between us. Like that no one could step in to help.

Later I would long to be able to tap back into that shortsightedness, to reimmerse in the close secrecy of that world that existed in its own time zone with its own patterns, and that permitted no others. To a mode of being that attended only to what was close, and where all that mattered was what was directly visible before my eyes.

Just as now I find the world of my dreams preferable to this one. How I am reluctant to shrug it off on waking, longing to remain there. In a there of panoramas, lucidity, acuity. There, where sentiment is uncomplicated by the abrasiveness of reality. How I have become practised in staying there, staying unmoving in the bed, my eyes still closed, residing in the last lingering impressions of my dreams.

Attending to what quivers, there, on the surface, in this gentle instant, sharp and vital, here, before the return of that distant backdrop.

MOTHER GOOSE

She can be comical – like a goose – and slightly sinister, like a white witch; she's a mother, who feeds her flock with stories and nonsense; she's female because speech is the realm of those who cannot read and write, like children, and like peasants and women in the past.

. . .

Nursery rhymes are populated with fabulous, talking creatures, with wooing frogs and laughing dogs, for children and animals have always liked one another, and even been confused by their elders, subjected alike to maltreatment on the one hand, petting and spoiling on the other.

— Marina Warner

It is no longer for thrills, no longer an option. It has become necessary. Cracking up through my ribs when folding clothes, tidying toys, worse, when spoonfeeding porridge. There, ladling spoonful after laden spoonful into your mouth. There, concentrating on the solid things: the plastic spoon laden with porridge, the china bowl rimmed with bunnies, still brimming with porridge. Watching your mouth open in an O, arms flapping, like a bird awaiting its worm. My heart is thudding, reaching my throat. I run my eyes along the grain of the ash tabletop, eyes like fingers grasping for the material things. I count the spoonfuls, robotic, one after another. Still the bowl is full of porridge, still your mouth in an O. There is too much porridge. The bowl contains too much. I cannot contain this. I open my mouth in an O as you open your mouth in an O for the next spoonful. My chest is tight. I move my hand containing the plastic spoon to the bowl, again to fill the spoon, again lift the spoon to the mouth opening in an O to mirror mine opening in an O, then closing around the spoon, to begin once more. One O two O three O four O. If I don't go, I know that I or something else will crack open. There, spooning unending porridge on a plastic spoon, beating down this thing that is rising up in me.
Then, flying out the door.

Stop running away, he says. *Stop leaving us.*
I'm not running away, I don't wait to explain, *I'm not leaving. This is the only way I can stay.*

◆

The midwife who hosts the birth gathering and had invited me to show *The Motherhood Archives* that year has a teaspoon she was given when christened. On its top is a tiny silver figurine of a stork carrying a baby in a piece of fabric hanging from its beak. *I hate the stork*, she'd responded when I asked her about it, *the absolute denial of all the labour and work done by women that goes into bringing a baby into the world.*

I've thought about this since, this story of the stork bringing babies. I'm not convinced that it does replace nor negate the real work of labour and midwifery. Do children actually grow up thinking that babies arrive carried through the air in the beak of a large white bird? The stork is a rare sight around here, while babies proliferate. The story doesn't seem to fit.

I wonder if the stork doesn't have more to do with the telling of stories that happens around birth than the birth itself. Is the stork representative instead of these tales we make of our experiences of giving birth. Experiences that shy away from language and from narrative, that in their wild duration, their intensive physical endurance, their cocktails of hormones and drugs, and their extraordinary work in shifting a tiny body encased in a larger body out of that larger body, have to be pieced together from the fragments that remain. Experiences that through this piecing together become cohesive narratives and that through the telling and retelling become memories. Is it perhaps the stork that transforms the birth from lived experience into story, the stork that recognises in birth stories their fabular quality, welding the miracle of birth to its mundanity?

◆

From walking you have returned once more to crawling. Head lifted, waggling your buttocks in the air you move purring across the room. You lift your hands, one at a time, admire them, sniff them, lick them. You eat your food not with a spoon, not with your hands, but with your mouth only. Planting your mouth in your bowl and with your teeth and tongue tearing at and drawing the food up into your mouth. You climb the staircase as a cat, prowling, your shoulders lift, one then the other, as you tread up and down the stairs, snarling, but you haven't yet perfected the tiger-leap from floor to chair so you must return to a two-legged version of yourself to climb into your chair. Or you must eat off the floor, squatting back on your hips between mouthfuls. You are frustrated by how limited your body is. You don't seem to be able to leap, to fly. But you are a cheetah, a

dragon. You can leap, fly *and* breathe fire. You are adamant. You don't answer to your name but to today's animal. You shake your head as I mistake a tiger for a lion, an ocelot for a meercat. *No, I'm a snow leopard,* you snarl and growl and hiss and shake your head in delight that I can't guess. And you glare at me, mere human, through hooded eyes.

◆

You have started nursery. It's only a few hours one morning a week. But when I collect you I don't recognise you. Your face wears someone else's expression. Worse, you smell of another body, another house's detergent. I don't know you. I am shocked by how easily you absorb another likeness. How quick you are to mimic another's gestures, their facial expressions. How fickle you are!

And them, have they gone home with your scent on their skin?

◆

The stork brings babies, the stork tells fables, writes Marina Warner. Like Mother Goose, teller of rhymes and nonsense, the stork is maternal, she is female, and as such she belongs to the demographic of those in the past who could not read or write. She is a teller of stories. I am inclined to think that the stork bears not the baby, but the story of the birth. And that it is the stork that alerts others to the birth, flapping its large and rarely-seen white wings through the sky, like a flag, alighting on the chimney-pot of the house where the baby is born. In Serbia, the stork is a hag, a wise woman. Perhaps, the stork is a gossip!

◆

I go to check on you before turning in and find you sitting up in bed, alert, your eyes open wide. Your breathing not that shallow breath of sleep, but irregular of awake. I kiss you. *Back to sleep*, I whisper and try to lie you down. Cogent, you ask, *Where's Daddy's axe? Where's Daddy's what? Daddy's axe… Where is it? At the workshop. Where at the workshop? In the shed there. Where's your axe? I don't have an axe. Oh…But you use Daddy's axe, don't you? Yes… Why? For the wolf.*

◆

I am no longer inside my body. I have squeezed my body into your body. I walk inside your body, holding my breath, trundling in your galloping step. In your body I fall while you leap over the two-inch threshold at the front door; in your body I slip on the mossy patio outside. I crunch my coccyx. The pain is extreme. My body has cracked in two. You carry on unslipping. I retch, I might be sick. In your body I don't see the thorns on the brambles, nor the stinging nettles, as your hand plunges in for the blackberry. In your body I am scratched and stung. Tears rise to my eyes. I let out a cry. But your body is much more able than I dare imagine it, your hand is unscathed, the blackberry bruises purple around your lips.

So, the times you do fall, that time you fell down the stairs, rolling sideways down and landing your head on the pamments, shoulder still on the bottom stair, or the time you fell off the armchair just a baby, or the time you stuck the stalk of an apple up your nose and blood cascaded. I have already lived through these scenes too many gut-wrenching times. It is familiar, and less ghastly when it happens.

When I return to my body, the body carrying on without my attention, I find I have left vestiges of my body in yours. And I find flashes of your body in mine. I am acutely conscious of your bowels, but I confuse them with my own. I wear your hunger, your frustration, your constipation, your flatulence. My own bodily excretions are heightened with the joy of achievement, I burp and the relief is vast for the burp has been long awaited.

I can no longer decipher your physiognomy from my own.

I do not know whose body is whose.

Worse, when I am out of your body I know the violence my body can do to yours: your vulnerability establishes my capacity to cause pain.

And I am scared not by your vulnerability but by my power. I am uneducated in the use, the misuse of power.

◆

The world of your imagination and the world of reality are interchangeable. You have no notion of fiction, nor of lying. The elaborate stories you conjure are just as true, just as real as what you had for lunch. You have just as likely eaten a boiled egg as had lunch with a monster in its cave.

◆

By night you wake screaming *no no no no no no!* I come to you and you kick and scream *no no no no no no! You're not my best friend! I don't want to play with you! I'm never going to play with you again! Never!*

Sometimes it is thirty minutes before I can calm you down, calm you out of whatever terror has woken you, calm you back into sleep once more.

What hurts, more than the torrent of playground abuse you hurl at me, is that someone has once said those things to you.

◆

In each of our hands we hold a pheasant. We find them slung over the door handle, a gift from a neighbour down the road. You are sitting on the sofa and your bird is on your lap. Mine too is

across my lap. But I am sitting on a stool in the centre of the room, in an apron, knees spread wide over a bucket and I am pulling out the feathers. You are crooning, stroking the feathers of your bird. My left hand is holding the skin of my bird taut, while the right is pulling out clumps of its feathers and dropping them into the bucket at my feet. Next, I will cut off its feet and dispose of those; I will cut off the neck, remove the crop, perhaps still full of corn, and pull out the windpipe. You tell me you will have your bird in your bedroom tonight. I will gut mine, reserving neck, heart and gizzard for stock. *It's too late*, I try to tell you, *too late to love the pheasant once it has died.* But you don't adhere to the same reasoning. You wrap it in a blanket and take it up to your room, saying it will sleep with you tonight. When I come upstairs you are in your pyjamas petting a dead pheasant on your lap.

◆

When you are ill, I remark how frail your limbs are, how fragile your chest, like a bird's. Your frailty is momentarily revealed. So much of the time it is disguised by your formidable will. How, like Alice, you shrink and you grow, and how, like Alice, I in turn rescale.

◆

He tells me how on the breakfast table you had arranged five tiny silk horses with fur manes around your plate. The horses are ancient, made in Thailand, five of them circling the ceramic plate on the dark wood table in your mother's kitchen. *Granny, Granny*, you called, he tells me, *Granny, look, it's a merry-go-round!*

Later, he tells me, he went into the kitchen and you were battering your grandmother with a wooden spoon and a carpet beater, one in each hand. She was fake-screaming, *Help! Help, it's a robber, I'm being attacked by a robber.* She rushed for the phone to fake-dial 999. *Hello, is that the Police? I'm being attacked by a robber with a wooden spoon and my very precious carpet beater.*

◆

When your dog friend Betty comes to visit you bound around with her, jumping, sharing food, sharing sticks. When she sleeps in her flannel dog bed you crawl in and sleep too. The imperious etiquette- and rule-bound world of grown-ups is shunned by both of you. She is your ally and your world is more akin to hers than to ours.

You take your cat to bed with you, tuck her into the covers beside you. Sometimes you dress her in a pink sleeveless top of yours that comes down to its hind feet like a pinafore. You ask for socks, to make of her a Kitty-in-Boots.

When I wake in the morning the cat is asleep stretched across you asleep too, her paws are lain either side of your neck and her chin is just beneath yours.

◆

For writer Karen Blixen, the stork comes to figure in a story she heard in her childhood, not a story of birth but one at the end of a life. The stork is the figure left by the passage of an old man who, on hearing a noise at night, sets out to find its cause. Guided only by the noise he stumbles and trips as he walks around his pond through the dark, hunting for the root of the problem. Eventually, he finds a hole in the dike, which he fixes before returning to bed. The following morning, he notices that the path left by his footprints the night before is in the shape of this bird.

Blixen's story suggests that the stork has less to do with giving birth that it does to do with making sense, through story, of that which eludes sense. It illustrates the unity in an apparently disparate set of events. And it makes of lived experience a tellable story with a causal narrative. It reminds us that it is retrospect that gives a narrative thread to our lives, that we make sense of what has come before by telling stories. Implicit in this is our faith in causality: because of X, Y, and due to Y, Z. Causality, or as a writer I know puts it, the morality of plot. The moral cause and effect of plot sequences, the so-called narrative arc. In its place my writer friend proposes, through her

work, that we rid ourselves of these illusions. Instead of the all-knowing narrator she offers unknowing, in the place of suspense, consolation.

◆

But I've also noticed how motherhood doesn't give itself so well to story. It eschews linearity and causality, it moves in temporal realms that don't obey the order of conventional narrative. To write motherhood, to write its truth, is to allow for incoherence and inconsistency. And outright weirdness. And I have wondered whether folktale, where fairy godmothers and evil stepmothers run amok, or nursery rhyme, where reason obeys another order, don't offer a more appropriate literary form for the experience.

◆

My hands, these same hands, nails bitten to the quick, are searching for your hair beneath the tiger's head.

Stroking your hair as you whimper in my arms, in a tiger suit, whimpering, tears running between my fingers, between my fingers your hair.

Between sobs:
Why did Daddy throw those books at you?
He was cross with me.
He scared me.
I know, I know, it's okay. Stroking your face, head, hair.
I thought he was going to throw you down the stairs.
He was very cross. Reaching for your claw-laden paw.

Suddenly cheered, a smile, mischievous, as you carefully recite: *Goosey, goosey gander / Whither shall I wander? / Upstairs and downstairs, / And in my lady's chamber. / There I met an old man / That wouldn't say his prayers; / I took him by the left leg, / And threw him down the stairs.*

◆

What draws me to the stork, to Mother Goose and to folktale is a stance somewhere between these two positions. I don't think that story need be all-knowing, causal, moral, nor make linear sense. I don't think life is able to perform to this orderly extreme. I think the power of the story lies in its transformative potential: it transforms lived experience into something fabulous, and simultaneously it offers a means with which to understand it. The power of these big beaky, flappy white birds, of gossip, and of storytelling is to lift reality off the ground, to adorn it in garb both macabre and fanciful, and to let it fly.

But there's another take, which comes to me as I am writing this. Perhaps I chose to reside in folktale and nursery rhyme, so as to cling to something of the world of childhood, of wooing frogs and laughing dogs. To furnish my imaginary with those tales, because otherwise I would have had to confront the total denuding of innocence that motherhood engenders. Perhaps clutching to the stork was to hold on to something of fantasy? And perhaps, eventually, motherhood requires the matter-of-fact pragmatism displayed in the response of my midwife friend.

R E A S O N

Thinking is not the thing that is done in this state.

— Claire Jarvis

Giving birth was like being happened upon, being happened to; it was an act in which I was present and absent, subject and object, both these and also sort of neither. I was wholly there and entirely elsewhere. The joy was perhaps that, being so profoundly, singly, present in something, in one thing, so much so that I absented myself. When giving birth there was nothing else, nothing beyond, nothing before, nothing after.

The memory of giving birth seemed to be held in my body in ways that were more than what was visible, more than the stretch marks, the stitched perineum. It was as if through having known something, my body could then access it again and again. It was thrilling, this sense of an experience that could be recalled, and it was other to me, other to thinking. This knowing was at a bodily, hard to decipher, hard to rationalise, level. It was something I encountered as those people close to me started to have babies.

◆

An old friend, rings on Skype. I can see her on the screen in front of me, rocking on a ball in the haven she has made of her home. Curtains, candles, in the screen, dim, the backdrop cavey. Crazed by the wait. She's in labour, she says, contractions gentle, but yes, contracting. The stretch East-West of land and a sea between us dissipates. My breath is deepening as our conversation speaks between our anatomies. The words she gifts me mouth to ear articulate the rising pleasure suffusing me from seated base up across sacrum, pelvis, spinal cord, up to cranium.

Is it simply memory, located in the body, being rearticulated? Remembered? What is it in her labour that conjures something in me?

◆

She, sister, rings. I tune out of my own home and into her labouring solitude. We talk about giving the baby space to move, about cosying down, about nipple stimulation, about walking sideways up and down the stairs. We talk about a birth dance, and as we talk about it, the rolling of the hips, the giving baby space to push, I hear myself saying, repeating, *who says a baby doesn't take part in its birth?*

Once more I am dancing in a slow solo birth dance around the room, moving my hips from side to side and in circles, opening my tummy and pelvis wide, letting gravity work, giving the baby's head and body space to move, to rotate, to birth, the handset stuck against my ear.

How it skids through the air to me, how I meet it, and it me. I too am slicked, rushing with the adrenalin of prelabour.

◆

I started to become greedy for it, for their stories, for how my flesh could voice these stories. And these experiences reiterated for me something of the magic of stories, of the power they held as catalysts, the power of words to make things happen.

◆

On the phone a friend is giving me the minute details of her labour, the pushing that happened to her in a hospital room unattended. My own body is heaving.

◆

These birth stories speak to my body as site of event. Their eventing bodies call these events into being in my body. Note how I shake my pelvis open. How my mouth lolls, the jaw drops a millimetre. My breath is catching with hers and with her.

The spoken story has a heightened charge in its delivery on the tongue in its carriage through the air. Voice is something matterful and when she speaks the texture of her voice is aquiver with stuff beside words.

When I search for written birth stories, I find I'm disappointed. The written story is quite other. To transcribe is to retain the words only, without the sensory matter they are trilling with.

◆

Was it this? This eventing body in its own secret relation to the world, in an ebb and flow occurring in a language not-spoken? What was it, a lively body acting right here and so very elsewhere? What was it? An unthinking instant? A verse of a nursery rhyme, a trope of folktale? I don't know.

I need a reason though, I know, an explanation for falling pregnant once again, for deciding to have another child, when I was still at a loss, in such a total state of *uncreation* as Adrienne Rich puts it. When being a mother for me was so heady with conflict.

Of course, there's no reason; it was in fact that, the absence of reason, the deliciousness of unreason, unknowing. The ceding to the happenings of my body, to not thinking.

◆

I do know of the hunger, then the nausea, then at twelve weeks back in a waiting room. Back on a padded turquoise chair, back my jeans open, back the blue cold gel being rubbed across the lower

part of my belly, back the blue paper being tucked by gloved hands into my knickers, back the hand-held scanner sliding back and forth over a plumping stretch of body.

There are two babies in there, says the woman doing the ultrasound. She doesn't use the word 'twins', so for a moment I think she's got something wrong, got confused, made a mistake.

But you are beside me and you are delighted and you have misheard, *Three babies*, you say, *three!*

S T A B A T M A T E R

And if one accepts fragments, layers, tesserae of mosaic, particles.
There is an art form in that too. Things juxtaposed but divided, not yearning for fusion.

— A. S. Byatt

How each house fixes a period of time, a mood. As if it is really this, the framework of the story, the structure on which the tale hangs. A house of straw, one of sticks, and one of bricks. And this house we moved to, the house I am writing in now, is different again, and the story too differs as well as the manner of telling.

This house was my mother-in-law's, and it holds still the traces of her mother-being. Sitting here, in this house which was hers, in which she too mothered, I continue to think about, to work through this subject: motherhood. How mothers have been represented, and how to write about this representation, and how to find a means of writing about mothers that doesn't betray them in the same way. *I, I, I, I,* writes Denise Levertov, *I multitude, I tyrant, I angel, I you*… I, mother, am not one and fixed, but I am each, all of these.

Pregnancy, as with moving house, offers a time for sorting through the archives, ordering, making sense, for drawing lines between the thoughts and the objects that surface. Indeed, this house, the one the wolf doesn't blow down, seems to make space for writing it all down. The fissures open allowing for abstraction, for reflection, and for writing.

◆

Mother-in-law

For want of a lapse in the purple-maroon wallpaper that folds around this room, enfolds the bookshelves, the fireplace as the filing cabinet, the occupants into its faux-Regency design, I have begun to paper over the area in front of my desk. My mother-in-law did little to endear the pattern to me – a motif of fleur-de-lys fountaining into grapes encircled by vines and forming a crosshatched heart where they meet – when handing over the house room by room replete with

her elaborate notes on draught and drainage. A handover that became a handover of all her long-engrained rituals, engrained into the very fabric of the house, so that it seemed the functioning of the house depended on our abiding by the same idiosyncratic tendencies, and attending to the house in the manner that it had become accustomed to. Amidst this daunting introduction to our new home, she remarked that if one dwelt long enough amongst the patterns on the wall of the study, the fleur-de-lys came to resemble gas masks. She thus obliged me not only to take on her rituals, but also to see the house through her eyes. Thereafter unable to lift the image, I work in a room of flowers figuring gas masks each entwined in the navy tendrils that frame them, where tendrils have nothing of the promise of spring growth, but briar-like they are barbed, and fence in both flower and heart.

Against this aesthetic, the pictures, postcards, pages torn from magazines, texts and poor quality images from the web appear to burst forth, as if an eruption from within the wallpaper. They are not. They are a flimsy attempt at dissimulation. My handiwork is indecorous, new images cover old ones, the pins don't hold in the plaster, the collage is always falling.

Postcards hang awry and the floor is littered with drawing pins.

Stabat Mater dolorosa

The English translations of the first line of this thirteenth century hymn describing Mary standing weeping at Jesus' cross vary widely. The literal translation goes something like: *the sorrowful Mother stood.*

Maria Lactans

Three of the images on the wall are torn from a book I found in my childhood bedroom, *The Virgin Mary through the Eyes of the Painters*. Dated 1951, the images are tiny black and white reproductions of renaissance Madonnas. These three depict Mary breastfeeding – the sole biological function she was permitted. My idea is that I might get something of *this*, through *that*. That although *she*, on the wall, is so far away from this body living *here*, there's also a proximity between us – that biological function. In an unlikely contrast to the paucity of imagery accurately

reflecting mothers' experiences, to the still evident resistance to breastfeeding in public, images of Mary feeding are rife.

Madonna del Parto

You were 15 months old. I wasn't pregnant. But we were driving from the Val d'Orcia back to Arezzo and I wanted to visit Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto*. There was a train we had to get late that afternoon, to Milan, followed by, several hours later, an overnight train to Paris, then a train to London at dawn, and finally a train home. I had figured that we could detour via Monterchi before leaving the hire car and jumping on the train at Arezzo. Had I yet learnt the so little that is possible, the so little that is already too much when with a young child? I was determined, but on the autostrada, still forty minutes from Monterchi, you started crying. We were about to put you through four consecutive train journeys; breastfeeding wasn't going to suffice for entertainment. We knew there was a park with a kiosk and a playground at the top of Arezzo. We made the decision quickly, pulled the hire car across the autostrada and took the final junction back on ourselves for Arezzo. We spent the afternoon at the park there. There, where the kiosk plays happy hardcore, pine needles cover the dry grey earth and Tuscany stretches in all directions. We sat drinking small plastic cups of coffee at the kiosk's white plastic tables and chairs, while you climbed up and then slid down the slide, calling us to watch.

Maria Lactans

The skewed Mary triptych part-obscures several taxonomies of mother-words, taxonomies gathered in an urgency to draw up a lexicon of motherhood. The words are a mix of my own, those overheard and those gathered from books. As if through collecting and then ordering these words, as if through setting them into categories of word types and meanings, I might grasp something of motherhood. I like the manyness of a taxonomy, and this manyness feels appropriate to the subject matter. I like that tangents are encompassed, not derided, and how by collating words something happens, meanings splurge outwards. I like that a taxonomy can be playful, contradictory, incoherent, and that it manages to name without closing down.

Madonna del Parto

There, on my screen, an image of Piero's *Madonna del Parto* housed in the original church. Her lapis blue robe, and her unusual height, exacerbated by her forehead. No girdle, no book nor flower.

Her hair plucked, hair by hair, back from her natural hairline to the crown making for that excessive forehead.

sticky
slippery
misty
milky
molten
melty
messy
slacken
swollen
tautness
bloated
bleary

Stabat Mater dolorosa

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi composed his setting of the Stabat Mater in 1736. In 2005 a friend gave me a recording of it that had been released in France that year. The cover image, as I recall, shows part of a sculpture of a woman. The sorrowful Mother, I imagine. But the image in my mind is much closer to that of Bernini's *Teresa of Avila* than a Pietà.

Pergolesi's composition for the Friday of the sorrows is condemned by some for its jaunty operatic inflections, thought to be *not quite the thing*.

Mariana

Mariana and I are in Florence for a conference. We bury our noses in the orange blossom of the monastery garden. *It's too much*, we say as we dust pollen off each other's noses. *How do the nuns stay celibate with this?* Or we admire the marble bodies outside the Ufizzi. The women are big and bold, even under the wingéd feet of their oppressors. We rename *Perseus Medusa*, though we can see little of her, and how we adore her curved brass limbs from beneath. *I wear clothes to hide my curves,* Mariana says, dressing as straightening out. But here we love the renaissance body. *When I used to life model,* I tell her, *I was told I had an old-fashioned body,* as she reiterates, *not having a feminist body.*

Madonna del Parto

Framed by the screen, the curtains being drawn open by two paper-cut-out angels, green red red green green red.

The Madonna's left hand on her hip. Her right hand gesturing towards, no, parting her clothes at her swollen middle.

descent and flexion
restitution
suture
cauterise
engorgement

let-down
rooting
posset

Stabat Mater dolorosa

The CD so scratched now, and I've nothing to play it on, so I try to get a digital replacement. That recording turns out to be quite hard to get hold of, but, trawling through iMusic I find over thirty alternatives.

iMusic permits me about 90 seconds of free listening to the first track of each of these recordings.

Ecstatic Mother

The Liberale da Verona images that Jacqueline Rose alights on: *Two studies of a woman, head tilted back and eyes closed, her child at her breast.* Rapid sketches of a scene glimpsed, the mother's eyes are cast to the ceiling, to the sky?, in pleasure. Ecstatic image (and it's no secret that mothers get high on breastfeeding, the milk-ejection hormone stimulated by sucking in turn propels the release of opioids, serotonin and dopamine), but, more importantly for Rose, the image establishes the mother as both sexual *and* maternal.

Maria Lactans

The first of the three images is of the Virgin in an elaborate crown of pearls against a murky backdrop. Touches of paint are suggestive of a veil falling to meet the curve of her alabaster neck. One spherical breast is revealed above an unlaced corseted gown. The child is held before her or perhaps it is sat on a plinth for with her other hand she is unfurling a piece of fabric, a swaddle? Child disinterested in breast, mother, viewer, turns his gaze elsewhere, off stage. Upright posture, developed limbs, suggests he's well past conventionally approved breastfeeding age. And the Virgin

– bare forehead mirroring breast, sharp curve of top of dress mirroring that of neck and the corset unlacing.

Madonna del Parto

Zoom in on the hand there, about to pull apart the dress at her belly.

Mariana

Mariana's nose is running. She is wracked with hayfever now, but the blossom-lust stays with us, roses, honeysuckle, wisteria, we inhale them all. *Is it the pollen drifting down from the lime trees, or the grasses they don't cut here as we do?* asks Mariana. *This is how the nuns stay celibate*, I muse, crouched on the roof overlooking the garden. Climb out of the cell window onto the terracotta roof. Tiles warm and the scent of orange blossom.

Mother-in-law

My mother-in-law drops in on her return from a trip to London. *I brought you this,* she says, handing over a leaflet on London Museums of Health & Medicine - *The go-to-guide for museums, collections and expertise relating to the history of medicine.* In tiny detail she recounts her visit to the Wellcome collection, telling me of each of the ex-votos, made to give thanks for prayers answered, fashioned roughly in clay by hand. *Tiny penises,* she says, *in answer to prayers for erections I suppose, breasts, an intestine, a placenta! And there's a scold's bridle too. What? For gossips! To silence women who speak too much.* A metal mask over the face, a clamp on the tongue.

abundance

expansive
copia
copious
cacophonic
infinite
perpetual
relentless
finitude

Weeping Statue

Somewhere a wooden statue of Mary nursing infant drips milk. Elsewhere stone statues weep. And from the window here wagtails fledge. Undaunted they tip themselves off the edge of the nest and plummet downwards.

Maria Lactans

In the second reproduction the Virgin's breast that the child squeezes, his eyes turned elsewhere, floats disembodied above her robes. Not pertaining to her. Perched there it is a strange disassociate object, allowing her to be at once fully clothed *and* breastfeeding.

Stabat Mater dolorosa

Not just my ears but my whole body strains to listen for the exact replication of my previous recording. In some cases it is a mere two or three seconds before I ditch the version I am playing, move on to the next. I am not open to bettering nor othering my original, I realise. I want the same.

It's not a want, it's a need. The relief of that recording, of piano, strings, vocals, has imprinted on my skin, my nerves, my muscles, my sinews. The original has impressed its notes, its patterns, its pace on my body and can only be answered by the exact same.

Each time a replication fails it's like stumbling, tripping up, falling. My whole body jolts with the missed note, the off sound.

contour
arch
dome
fold
crease
crown

Madonna del Parto
In 1910 the Piero Madonna is detached from the wall in the chapel to reveal an earlier fresco. The heads of a Virgin, a child and an angel, and one hand, all are revealed just beneath.

Mother-in-law
A bough of roses, *Cuisse de nymphe*, falls over the front door of my mother-in-law's house, obscuring the door frame. We have to duck and shimmy around the branch on entering. The June winds strew petals across the floors of the house. She doesn't brush them up. Why would she? They look rather lovely.

Jesus as Mother

An image of Jesus proffering his wound, the folds of skin pressed between his fingers like a breast offered to a suckling infant. The blood pouring from his wound being drunk by his followers. Like the cup, brought to the lips of each of the disciples. *This is my blood. Drink ye all of this.* The body offered at The Last Supper. *Take. Eat.*

Mother-in-law

Months later the petals lie there still, brown-yellow, gathered in the corners of the rooms where they have blown.

Stabat Mater dolorosa

Eventually I opt for a recording made in 1999, sung by Andreas Scholl and Barbara Bonney. It is close, well close-ish, to my original version. The opening chords, the entrance of the contralto mimics my own. Admittedly it then veers off in other directions, but I had only the first 90 seconds in which to make my comparison.

Madonna of Parturition

It's hot, and the pregnant Madonna I'm trailing is about 3cm further South-West than the reach of my tourist map. The streets of the Oltarno in their three-dimensionality, the blowing dust, the casual bicycles carrying two or three, the flurry of mopeds and cars spewing more dust, the traffic lights planted mid-strada, the tall, shuttered ochre, pink and white buildings with roofs jutting a good two feet over the top of them making for cool dark passages in the narrower streets, these between swathes of the city exposed in a stark white light, the *gelateria* there, and the square where a market is being set up… none of this translates to the 3cm by 3cm I have plotted in my head.

fountain
overspill
container
containing
holding
folding
unfolding

Madonna del Parto

In the Andrei Tarkovsky film, he, the poet, never goes to visit the Madonna he has travelled from Russia to see. She, the translator, crosses the fields in fog, *Come on,* she says. *Non voglio*, he replies.

She finds she can't kneel in the church when asked to do so. Whether it's the length of her skirt, the height of the heels on her shoes, the ungracious stone slabs, or whether her inability to kneel is due not to physical hindrance but psychological or moral complications is unclear.

Maria Lactans

In the last of the three images the Virgin's hair is unruly, and the infant is as an infant truly is, and is held so in the mother's hands, his latch textbook. Her hair is falling from the scarf in which it is tied and behind her on a cupboard sits a basket of crumpled laundry. The messiness. And just beyond that to the right-hand side of the picture, and so unclear in this black and white reproduction, there's an open shutter through which I can just see some hills. Verdant hills just beyond and the feel of a breeze on my skin.

Madonna of Parturition

A car's width between two blocks of houses, the road wends uphill, and the road that gets narrower as it gets higher, the road has the same name as the church I am looking for. I'm on track. It's suddenly rural, people are pottering, geraniums sit in terracotta pots on the street, wisteria fall over

stone walls, and green shutters are tilted open preserving the shade. Balconies are heavy with washing and in the narrower parts, washing lines are strung across the street from one house to another, between windows, with these little pulleys to reel the laundry out and in. At the top, the road opens into the white glare of a square that slopes down to my left. At first I can't see the church. I see high garden walls, over which the tops of cypress trees are visible and I see cars parked in every possible space and with no apparent order. But the steps there, to the southern corner, lead up out of the square to the wooden door of a church.

Madonna del Parto

In the forties an alcove is constructed over the Monterchi Madonna, behind which the fresco is bricked to protect it from damage during the war.

Mariana

Mariana and I are swooning, but stigmata do not form on our hands. We take photos of the nuns' vests and nighties strung out on low washing lines over the vegetable garden, over the herbs and lettuces teased from the dry soil, but the images don't capture the scents hanging on the warm air. Mariana's nose is red now and blistering.

Madonna del Parto

In the fifties the chapel is moved from an East-West to a North-South orientation, and the fresco moved from the East wall to the North.

Stabat Mater dolorosa

I find the new recording has erased the imprint of the original. It is this recording I strain towards when I hear the opening notes on the radio. Were I to listen to the 2005 recording now, I know

I'd be disappointed, I'd find the vocals start too early, and the bit where Bonney really milks it, is not milked quite enough.

Corpus Christi

I read of medieval bodies falling pregnant on consumption of the host. *I love you so much I could eat you.*

Vierge Ouvrante

…of *vierge ouvrantes*, the sculptures of the Virgin, about 3-foot-high, carved out of wood with two doors at the front. The two doors are on hinges so that they might be opened and closed.

Relic

The little Virgin-shaped plastic bottles sold to pilgrims to hold Holy Water drawn up from the well in the Walsingham Shrine.

Madonna del Parto

East to North, the change in light. How the light falls on the Madonna.

Giornate

A fresco is made by layering pigment and water onto wet lime plaster. The whole painting is completed in the time it takes for the plaster to dry. From dawn till dusk. A larger fresco is thus painted in several fragments. Known as *giornate*, meaning *a day's work*, each fragment is a day's worth of painting. Over time the distinctions between the *giornate* may become apparent. Lines, fissures appear.

Madonna del Parto

In the nineties the *Madonna del Parto* is brought down the hill to a school in the village for further restoration.

Madonna of Parturition

And, as if I already knew, the coral-coloured church is closed. There's a sign in front of it that reads *Messa 11.30 la domenica*. There's a bell. I ring it before realising it's for the house next door. There's a telephone number but I don't have a phone. And the sign outside, I'm pretty sure it says the Virgin is being restored. Maybe she's under plastic in there, or dust sheets, or behind scaffold. It's not clear, my Italian's not good enough. And no one answers the door.

disintegration
disoriented
disjointed
displaced
disunite
fragmented
dissolution
shatter
obliterated

Maria Lactans

In all three images the Virgin's eyes don't meet the onlooker's gaze. All are downcast.

Relic

The phial of the Virgin's breast milk in Walsingham still.

Fresco Cycle

A fresco cycle narrates a story, often in framed, separate parts, and often across a number of walls. (See, for example, the Brancacci Chapel in Florence.)

Madonna of Parturition

Returning down the hot dusty road, and to the known centre of Florence, I come across a man. He's circling a haphazardly parked car, his fists are raised, he's moving sideways, crablike or like a boxer in a ring, he is slamming cacophonies of what must be expletives into the air, each prompting a little jump from his two feet. He pays no attention to me, only continues his performance.

Madonna del Parto

In the film a statue of the Virgin is brought into the chapel where the devotees are praying. It is placed on the ground. A girl, her hair held back by a piece of white lace, covering her head and shoulders, her black curly fringe only just appearing at her forehead, kneels before it and leads a series of incantations. Prayers to Mary to help her become a mother. When the prayers finish the girl parts the statue's robes. Click. Click. Click. The opening of buttons reverberates through the chapel. Out of the robes, where her stomach would be, burst hundreds of small white birds. Screeching. The girl remains still. She kneels there, her two hands opening Mary's robes at her stomach as the birds rush out only just missing her face.

Fresco Secco

The use of egg tempera in the process is a later technique that allows frescoes to be painted on top of dry plaster. The technique of *fresco secco* also permits traditional wet plaster frescoes to be revised, mistakes to be edited out, and the separations between the *giornate* to be disguised.

Madonna del Parto

Mother of all mothers, who knows the pain of being a mother. Mother of all mothers, who knows the joy of being a mother. Mother of all children, who knows the joy of having a child. Mother of all children, who knows the pain of not having a child. Mother who understands all, help your daughter to become a mother.

Ecstatic Mother

Liberale da Verona's images become a precursor to the *brelfie*, the breastfeeding selfie, where the breast is not *either* sexual *or* maternal, but both at once, and where the mother does not tend to throw her head back in ecstatic joy, but to look directly at the camera, her eyes engaging with those of the viewer.

Madonna del Parto

The suggestive hand of the Madonna there on her stomach, fingering the folds of her robe. Behold!

Revealed by the angels either side, drawing back the curtains of the dais, a moment of theatre. Behold!

Madonna del Parto

Drawing back the curtains or about to drop them?

Madonna del Parto

Piero's *Madonna del Parto* stands behind glass now in a museum made of what was the old school. A site of devotion, of prayers for the safe delivery of babies, the entrance fee for pregnant women continues to be waived.

Madonna del Parto

The opening there, the fingers pressing there, there peeling back, there unlacing, the shutters ajar there, and there the shuttered eyes, it's there that the gaze hooks and it's there that something begins. Like a flaw, a strabismus, something jars, calls my attention.

The curtains are thrown open for the performance. There's a sense of anticipation, of something about to be glimpsed. The image seems to depend on this moment of theatre.

Yes, something reaches out, the promise of something.

No. The suggestion suffices. It is this that renders the image and the viewer, both, more complete, and more corporeal.

A feeling in the body of this order, of becoming more material.

◆

Most salient in the archive of motherhood are the gaps and the absences, the stories that aren't told, the voices that aren't heard. But despite this, there is a proliferation of words, images, and ideas. Motherhood is dramatically overrepresented, but the representations fall so far short, are so

utterly other to the experience. And motherhood is so intensely vulnerable to misrepresentation, to misappropriation, to becoming reified, or metaphor.

I am cautious then about imposing order on an experience whose greatest lesson is perhaps the dismantling of order, the farce of order – the very impossibility of order. Motherhood is a construction, yes, it is, to quote a friend of mine, *not a natural state one falls into but performed, self-fashioned, and created.*

None of these representations alone succeed, each fails me, fails mothers, but as I make collages and cut ups, as I build my own archive, something starts to emerge. Something sudden, hard to fix, something like the birds flying noisily from between Mary's robes and at the girl's face.

As my friend suggested, it might be a construction, but motherhood is also open to being constructed.

E R O T I C S

One evening, sitting beside you on the chest in your bedroom. Dangling legs. Yours, mine. You smile at me then, checking I am watching, you stuff your fingers down your throat and retch. You turn to me and smile again, then stuff your hand in your mouth once more. Retch. Repeat. Retch. Repeat. Retch. I am queasy. You are delighted by this mechanism, by your throat's reflexes. I can't turn away.

Pregnancy engenders fantasy. I have countless affairs, figments of my imagination.

It's him who faints this time, giving birth. Together we are going through this again. This time in hospital, this time I want him to hold me. I want him to hold my body through this, through searching for then finding, through remembering this practice of giving birth. Knowing only my exhaustion: too tired to labour, too tired to mother two babies. Holding my hands across the ball from me I begin to notice the noise of his, of your, breath above my own: you're panting. You pull yourself up off the floor then collapse in a faint on the hospital sofa.

If I'm worrying at the body like this, pushing at its marks and indentations, isn't it something about the physical toll of being alongside a child? That the bodily toll might tell something of mothering. The everyday physicality of picking up, carrying, lying down, strapping into high chairs and car seats, of dressing and undressing, changing, bathing and tucking into bed, of feeding in all its permutations. This body skewed in its attention to another.

I know the counternarratives lust weaves in the mind.

I find myself biting my bottom lip, biting then sucking my bottom lip. I catch myself at it again and again. What's odd is that you, since you've started walking in fact, have started biting your bottom lip. You toddle around chewing it. For several weeks I have been watching and wondering at your top lip that pouts out and your bottom lip caught between your teeth. And now I am doing it too. They say that children learn by mimesis, and yet sometimes I feel like *I* am learning by mimesis. Like your progression is my regression.

Put it in, you say, taking my finger and pressing it into your tummy button. *Put it in.*

I am on the floor. I am kneeling, naked except for a t-shirt that is hitched up to my neck. I am holding your tiny new body to me, your mouth to my breast. I am holding you to me and there is another baby still inside of me. A midwife's hand is reaching up between my legs to feel for this next baby's head, which has disengaged. I've been told this. The two babies are held so compactly together in their separate sacks of water in the womb that after the first is born, the second can become disoriented by the sense of release, float up, swim and swing around in the newfound space. Or might start to panic.

This without rest without succour this without time off time out without a break from day and night and any time off snatched is time engaging the body in the other tasks not done while doing the mother thing.

And I wonder what other sort of body encounter a mother might have with another?

I watch you chasing flesh, your hands grasping at the reveal between jeans and t-shirts just above the height of your head, your fists greedy in their search for flesh.

Touched. Then over-touched. So that the longing is not for other bodies but no-body.

Twenty minutes, I've been told, is the maximum amount of time permitted between birthing the first baby and the second. The midwives, though, are unfazed. *Get some rest,* they say.

The strange bruises from being crumpled up with you, you all, clambering over me, or piled on a chair for a story, or for horsey rides on my knees.

Right now it feels like: Not even sex now I know how tightly stitched it is to pregnancy, motherhood, the lot.

But when I lie down the contractions begin again, the pain again as your head does engage, the burning again as your head crowns, and with it a hand. And this time I really have to push. You are stuck, your forearm and head are caught, mid rotation, clamped between my cervix. You are holding a midwife's hand with your emerging hand, and to get you out I'm really going to have to push.

Your tantrums explode, anything might be the catalyst, the colour of the spoon, the texture of the porridge. Your anger flares, then narrows itself into a bite. You grab whatever is nearest to you, the table, the chair or your sleeve and you bite. Your whole body shudders in this bite act. Your jaw, your teeth, your lips are the point of your anger.

All that violence contained there inside your mouth.

Still my eyes run over and over the pale skin bared at the top of his or his trousers, at his hips, visible when he or he raises his arms, bones splaying like half-moons. To rub them, to rub against them.

If a mother defines simply in the act of being alongside a child (I'm not sure that's quite good enough, quite right) I notice how my toes, my whole feet are trodden on by the child hanging onto my legs, how my pelvis swings right to balance the child always clasped on my left hip, how my forearms have become muscular, how my shoulders broaden through bearing these children alongside.

The gentle rubbing of every bone in my body?

(And, does becoming a mother do away with the vestiges of childhood that lived on in the strands of fantasy? Do these hands, now occupied with an infant, a burgeoning body of fantasy, no longer grapple with my own mother's body. Does motherhood signify the abrupt amputation of the world of fantasy, and is my task now to forge another's fantasy realm? In my hands to hold a body that I will fail to satisfy and in failing to satisfy it forge that viscous realm. Here, mothering: creating, containing and managing an other's fantasy world.)

I have a photo of this moment somewhere. There is one baby on one of my breasts and another baby on my other breast. There are dark smears of blood on my stomach. There is a bowl on a table beside me containing two placentas.

The time you were angry at having your nappy put on, tantrum like rage blasting through your arching back, your head smashing so fast and hard into my jaw I couldn't see. I couldn't see and then the tears of pain. I couldn't be angry then.

You on my lap warm against me and for a moment still. I am falling asleep. As I succumb, you start to wriggle. Your chubby hands start to search, pulling at the clothes at my neck, then find their way down through my open collar to skin. I like the feel of your warm handprint on my chest. Sticky with peanut butter, jam or play-doh, your hand strokes the upper flesh of my right breast. Sleep taking me still. Hand rooting around until it finds the nipple, and there flicking, tweaking, and ever so softly stroking the right nipple.

I don't mind.
I don't mind: nobody else touches me there.

Your large, pale blue eyes are staring into mine. Your arms are wrapped in mine, your body in mine. Together we are circling, whirling around the room, you are laughing, we are both laughing, the joy is unsupportable, this is love, I think, this is love, I am bursting with love, I love you, you love me, all the while dancing, whirling, singing *Incy wincy spider climbed up the waterspout.*

My gaze as you encounter the edges of your own body. The seeing you oblige me to. Should I look away? Should I pretend not to see?

Frightening thought: Did I too have these encounters with my mother's body, was I as part of her as you are of me?

Further thought: We have each been held in another body, known the tightness of the womb compacting our limbs, known the thudding darkness of a warm place without light that holds us unthinking, known the constancy of being wrapped in an other's skin and known the precarity of absolute dependency.

How we vilify dependency. Hard to shake that lone self. Hard to shake or reluctant to shake?

This morning, though some have been a small hand slapping me across the face with a *Wake up!,* this morning perusing a book about diggers sitting in bed beside me still wrapping myself in what remains of sleep you put two toddler-size hands to my neck and draw my chin upwards and towards you before folding your translucent cheek onto mine. Your cool pale cheek against mine. You lift your cheek from mine and release my chin. And then you do it again. You draw my chin upwards

and fold your cheek to it. This is love like I have never known. You continue the act and on some occasions your face is over my mouth and nose and I can't breathe. Still you continue. I am partaking in your ritual of giving and meeting of skins, our faces coming together. And it feels like love.

I have wondered what other shapes love might take. Love not as something packaged up and given, nor taken from greedily at will. Love as practice. Love as cheeks and hands coming together and apart, silent and slow. A cool laying of face on face. Your cheek being repeatedly squashed against mine.

Your cheek, face, your hands, your body against mine, your fingers take swathes of my body. How gently you unravel me, you loosen the hardened bits, and with your little fingers you prod at my closedness. Your closeness. Your prodding caring fingers are the lesson, are the means of coming to love.

And today sitting up on the bed with me you notice each other and smile and gurgle and giggle and start to chatter making sounds, start to call back and forth to each other in your own language.

W O M A N A L O N E

She was alone so she could hear herself thinking. She was alone so she could hear herself living.

— Sheila Heti

To think about mothering, one has to be able to step outside of it. The marshes offered the necessary counterpoint to the crushed frenzy of maternity and the domestic: out there I could breathe, out there I could think. Stepping outside of it allowed me to gather my thoughts and gain perspective. As with reading and writing, walking, swimming, solitude and silence, all were tools I had depended on with which to live. These were the tools of the solitary, tools that mothering deprived me of. Going to the marshes was a means of making terms for what I was in, putting words to this period of time that without words was so hard to gather.

I came to see that my ideas about motherhood had set up unsettling binaries for me. I longed for the at-oneness it promised, but resented this, and longed for an out. I craved at-oneness, I craved solitude. I found myself caught between a desire to merge with my others and one to firm up my boundaries, unable to do either.

That reverie that is promised by motherhood, that entirety of absorption, came in snatches. But on the marshes it was entire. Alone, I wasn't isolated. Nor was my aloneness a means of individuation. Rather, my time spent on that edge of land troubled the dichotomy of individuation/fusion. For there it wasn't either/or, it was both. I was alone and among. Submerging in a creek, steeping myself in water, showed me my contours, but also that I was part of something. My solitude out there was not a separation from the land and its inhabitants, but a means of relating to it.

I knew the land, and yet I could never know it, could never predict what I would encounter. The light, the water, the colour, the weather, the tide, each element came into play so that it was always entirely new. As, again and again, the highest tides covered the land leaving only the very tops of the grasses, of the sea lavender, there was a sense of becoming anew.

Land and self becoming anew again, as if the tide had a purpose and it was that.

The marshes marked the carrying on of time, over time, they were like a metronome, giving a continuity and cohesion to life, one that was explicitly absent from my day-to-day.

There are distinct types of solitude. Solitude need not be isolation, nor does one necessarily feel less alone when among others. The solitude I experienced on the marshes was one through which my self seemed to vanish - *I* vanished. Yes, this troubled figure of the *I* ceased to exist, to matter. This was a solitude that was also a becoming of: a means of connecting to the world beyond myself.

In motherhood, I thought I wanted full immersion, reverie, sublimation. What irked me was why I couldn't be with my children, as I was on the marshes. As indeed I was with a book. To be as I was alone, when with others.

Is motherhood so much a loss of self, I wonder now, or an encounter with the self? Encounter with all the elements of the self that can be ignored, denied, walked away from up until that point. Encounter with self, propelled through encounter with tiny others.

You from whom I can't walk away. Your faces that look up at me still like I have something to give, like I have a way to show.

Never before had I come so close, so hard up against myself, my selves. Mothering obliged me to budge up and make space for my others. It asked me to conceive of myself differently and reconfigure my relation to the world, and it wasn't in the pressured environment of mothering that I could do this, but when away from it, when on that wild edge.

Writing, as going to the marshes, show me other ways of seeing. Just as my project here is to give voice to these unknowable things, to what it is to be alongside a child, and to what it is to be alongside a land, so writing about it shows me ways of being with my children as I am on the marshes. Rather than seek solitude *or* at-oneness, I can be alone *and* among my children, simultaneously. I can apply the same method.

M E T H O D

You are three. A firstborn and a pigeon pair. You exceed me. You. You. You. You exceed my watch, exceed my care, exceed my comprehension.

Not mine. Not owned, nor belonging to, nor belongings, these beings that have come alongside. Of your own volition, seems. And are your own people. Not known. All I can do is hold out my hands to shelter you, to guide you when you get too close to the edge, to stop you from falling. Not even. Proffer my two hands. Try to catch you as you fall.

◆

I have become a gravitational body around which you orbit, gradually further away, but always checking back on your centre. Only when I move, leave the room, realign, do you start to fret, cry, call out, grab for my legs. *Carry! Carry!,* you say.

◆

Slick of dough on wooden table, sodden dough sliding across, across it sideways, and moving back and forward in these pushing hands, the dough spreading, fingers sticking in sticky dough, outside the window, baiting your younger sister by offering her a favourite never-allowed toy, letting her hold it, then yanking it from her hands, running off in glee, the dough, the hands pulling and rolling and rubbing and only just containing this wet spread of dough across the table, the moisture darkening the wood, nails, tips of fingers, knuckles disappearing into doughflesh, to express sadness she puts her head on one side and then lowers it, and her whole upper body to the ground, best not intervene, the move of the dough sideways across the table as if with its own momentum, hands folded into the dough, dough folded over the hands, what's *to knead* in French? to knead, or to need?, it's not so much having a child as always the possibility of losing that child, that passage of a book, kneading cream into the flesh of a mother's back, the gnya of *oigne, oignant l'oignement*,

all I recall of that book, ointing, ointment, the unction of unguent, rubbing skin giving to reverie, outside, the wail of a taunt soon resolved, the blemish spreading, back and forth, the movement not just in the hands but in the wrists and the forearms, moving up the forearms to the elbows, and sideways, left elbow cutting across the body and right striking forward, fold the edges into the middle, less sticky now, *pétrir!,* yes, upstairs a thud, then the patter of feet, all well, and your fears, fear of the water dribbling down the drain, of the plug coming out of the bath, of the plastic turtle floating away down the river, wild panic, yes, sticky turning to smooth with the pulling, slight rocking of the upper body, hands no longer visible, same panic when I close my eyes, just close my eyes, might I, five minutes, forty winks, *Don't close your eyes,* you shout, *Don't go to sleep!*, as if by closing my eyes, I too might be slipping away from you, now a warmth to the dough, warm and almost pulsing, almost living, this lump under the hands, in the hands, hands in it, rhythm pushing up into the shoulders, so that kneading dough is kneading shoulders, not really kneading at all, all senses tuned in to the where of the children, mind travelling through all the upstairs rooms, the rocking back and forth, the table starting to judder too, to an observer kneading bread, but really kneading is the one thing not being done, counting off potential hazards, lamps, plugholes, wires, strings, scissors, books that could be torn or chewed, off-balance chests of drawers, heavy drawers, heavy doors, holes in floorboards, loose nails, listening out for footsteps near the stairs, or the happy paddling of toilet brush then hands in the toiler, or when pattering turns to silence, the back and forth of the dough, the back and forth of care, *What is it, what is it?,* your fearful pointing, the yellow of the light on the water, that yellow spinning on the brown sediment in the creek, the dough coming to a body, a last few folds, body, dough, table all in rocking motion, the back and forth processes of care, care become method, and then slipping away to reverie.

◆

The paddling pool is empty. Soggy grass gathers at its corners and a green mould is beginning to grow along its creases. You are growing up, extracting your bodies from mine. You attest to your singular becoming.

We have friends over, friends with whom once we sat dumbstruck, babies on our laps, mouths and eyes gaping, unspeaking, unable to form speech. There is wine, and sun. The younger children are playing inside and the two eldest in the sandpit. Today we are lolling and drifting. We are

finishing sentences, and it has stopped mattering when we don't. We've become accustomed to these ways of thinking too, they work for us now. Better – we're good at it. Our grammar has stretched, become plastic, and we flick between tenses. Linguistic fragmentation is our new norm. The kids aren't a question now, and we've got this far together. The sun, the grass, the alcohol has lifted something, made it exaltation. It's like we're celebrating being on the far side.

Our eyes fall on the girls shrieking in the sandpit. They are standing up, their pelvises thrust forward, one sallow, slender, the other pale and still clad in remnants of baby fat. They are standing up, slanting and pissing, laughing at the shapes the streams of urine are making in the sand. It's running down their legs and they are wiggling their hips in laughter watching it spurt over each other's feet.

We should scold them, tell them off, contain them, for this is the only way we have managed to parent recently, for last week their daughter stood up like this and pissed all over their bed when they changed the bedtime routine or, whatever act of finitude it was that they were imposing, she stood up, just like this, pelvis shoved forward and pissed all over the sheets, the duvet and the pillows.

So, we should tell them off, one of us should get up, instil parental authority, explain, but glazed as we are, their laughter hits our stomachs too. Hell, we admire them.

◆

You have tired of your elder sister's game and taken to stripping flowers. I am wondering whether hyacinths are poisonous, knowing your propensity for putting things in your mouth. Or up your nose. My mouth placed as suction over your nostrils. You have fallen, knocked your knee. You come to me, to these doughy hands. You present your knock. When I knock myself, my elbow or my knee, I rub it. A habit, so unthought, it is hard to think of it as once learned. When you fall, when you knock yourselves, too often I forget to rub. I pick you up, forget to rub. I have to remind myself to rub your scrapes until you learn to rub your own. No particular science in this rubbing that lessens the pain. It has to do with being, in some small, discreet way, held. Recall the tale a friend told of the midwife's hand on the small of her back, rubbing. The hand on the back

at the point of pain, bearing some of that pain. Today I rub your knee. I rub it. Then together we rub it. You run outside to join your sisters. I turn on the radio. Return to the methodical back and forth of the dough. Knowing a coming to reverie through repetition, through practices mastered, through method. Right hand stretching dough forward, left across the body folding it over. *Daydreaming to keep myself sane,* a friend said. A refuge. Like the radio, like turning up the volume and slipping into it. Letting go of the anxiety of attention. A little. Now pummelling the dough. Throwing it around like a ball and pummelling it. It's ready now, to meet knuckles. It bounces back against the touch of the hands. *It might come back,* you say. *It might come back*, your phrase that protects you from loss. The pummelling, the rocking slowing now to a still. The blemish across the table. The breath slowing. Dough covered with a cloth to rise. White potter's slip up to wrists. Pergolesi on the radio.

◆

Here to soothe and scold and to put food on the table, but otherwise I'm beside the point. It's mob rule. And, in your strange outfits, your shoes on the wrong feet and your seven t-shirts layered one over another, or your short-sleeved striped t-shirt paired with short-legged striped trousers and a baseball cap, or your lion costume over socks and sandals, you design and furnish your own kingdoms. You build shops in the plank shed, stick prices on the jetsam you gather. You coil rope and wear bicycle helmets and woolly gloves and set off to climb mountains. You pack picnics, pyjamas, teddies and scissors for your camping adventures under the laurel. You tear around. The cats take part, under your direction. Sometimes you put on shows for us. The spout from the petrol can is your microphone. I glimpse you emerging from the chicken house. You raid the kitchen drawers. The more dangerous the tool the more appealing. You make the most delectable mud pies, which you decorate like floral fantasies. You offer them to me. I pretend to eat them but I'd like to preserve them. Kitsch mud cakes, sloppy mud smoothies. Your pull all the heads from the flowers to make potions, to make confetti, to make tea, to make more pies. You grind seeds and berries to make coffee that you serve at a cardboard-box table with plastic cups and a sieve. You raid your grandmother's glass jar of plasters. You pester birds. You save frogs. You try to nurse dead shrews back to life. You set up veterinary surgeries in the bathroom. And blockade it from the inside. You climb fully-clothed, fully-shoed into our bed and look at picture books under the covers. You play an *It's morning!* game and a *Bedtime* game in singsong voices. You

drag your mattresses downstairs to make dens. You wear the elasticated sheets over your heads, lurch around giggling. You don't know that you signify ghosts. You paint the gravel. You turn round and round in circles until you are giddy and knocking into each other and the furniture. You wrestle and tease and mock and humiliate. I don't know what you do. You mash all your food up into a slop. Your beans can't touch your fish fingers, nor your fish fingers each another. And your fish fingers must be laid the right way around on the plate. You spread marmalade on your sausages. You make cranes and combine harvesters out of old plastic. You get up at five, get everyone up, then fall asleep over breakfast. You raid the roses planted either side of the path to the church for their lush red petals. You scrub the gravestones in the churchyard with our best towels and pinch the plastic flowers, wind chimes and tiny plaster angels from the graves to adorn your bedrooms. You paint your nails with felt tip pen. You tattoo each other then tattoo the walls. You eat wild strawberries straight from the plants. You eat strawberries and tomatoes while they're still green. You gather shells to hide in secret places. You hide everything and when you don't you forget where you left it.

K I N

There are a number of things that cannot yet be explained. One is how the placenta avoids tripping the silent alarm that alerts the mother's immune system to the presence of an intruder. The placenta is made up of the cells of two individuals – indeed, it is the only mammalian organ with this characteristic. In that sense, it is like the lichen growing here in the furrows of Maple bark. Part fungus, part algae, lichens represent a symbiosis so complete that the two organisms are, for all intents and purpose, one creature.

— Sandra Steingraber

Our breast milk, it turns out, is as polluted as our environment at large. Laboratory analysis of breast milk has detected paint thinners, dry cleaning fluids, flame retardant, pesticides and rocket fuel. Most of these chemicals are found in microscopic amounts, the journalist Florence William notes, 'but if human milk was sold at the local Piggly Wiggly, some stock would exceed federal food safety levels for DDT residues and PCBs.'

— Eula Biss

There is a cry. I do not recognize it.

— Naomi Wolf

The placenta is synecdochic: it speaks for the maternal two-in-oneness. Like pregnant body and foetus, mother and infant, it too is both singular and non-singular. It worries at ideas of borders, of self and non-self. It is licheny, it behaves like something between a seaweed and a mushroom, like something that is both seaweed and mushroom, not like a mammal at all. And yet, a placenta is common to nearly all mammals.

The placenta is a useful metaphor for thinking about the maternal dyad, this being that splits in two, inhabits two bodies at once. The dyad that figures in myriad variations: the pregnant body, the lactating mother and breastfeeding infant, the person carrying a child on her hip, with one hung on her legs, etc.

Draw a line around an individual, its outlines, its bounds. With pregnancy this individual expands to encompass another, the outline changes, predominantly at the stomach. Mothering, the bounds of the individual expand to encompass the child. Foetus then infant are contained within the wider outline of the mother. This dyad appears to be a bounded, discrete entity, but it is composed of two separate individuals. It manages to retain a sense of oneness, and simultaneously troubles it.

Whether mother and child are deciphered as one or two depends on the lens through which one is looking. Proximity, distinction, sameness, otherness, all are depicted in pronominal choices. I, we, you, they etc., the slipperiness of pronouns a mother uses to designate herself and her child attest to the variable ways of conceiving of this relation, to the troubling of definitions that the presence of a child confers on the individual.

The placenta, like another organ, the skin, both are conceived as barriers. Both are preventative membranes, which protect what is inside from what is outside. The skin as border is a concept that I have been particularly attached to: it deciphers internal from external, what is me, from what is not me. Concepts are useful, they are strategic, they offer us tools with which to handle information. Through abstraction we find means of thinking, of knowing, designating and classifying. But through abstraction, nuance and specificity are lost. Concepts can also be misleading.

Scale down through the skin border of the pregnant, the lactating body, to the fluids that are circulating there, to the amniotic fluid, the breast milk. Scale down to the point where microscopic particles, microbes, miniscule organisms become the protagonists and the story told is quite another. Studies show that breast milk and amniotic fluid contain pollutants, pesticides, even *paint thinners, dry cleaning fluids*. Contaminated by the environment they mimic what is in the air, in the land and in other bodies outside their body. At this scale it is apparent that these borders are illusory: what is in the world is in me.

Mothering shows me that these concepts, while getting at lived experience, while being felt and known, and while being helpful for thought, often make for vexed starting points. Individuation, fusion. Self, other. Internal, external. Nothing is that clear-cut.

Having twins disrupted many of these binaries; they were no longer applicable. There was no possibility of at-oneness, there was no dyad, and there was no individual. There was no non-singular singular entity, but many beings and multiple relations surging between them.

The placenta confounds for a further reason: why does it not recognise and then reject those elements of itself that are genetically different to those of the pregnant woman. This leads in turn to wonder why the pregnant body itself doesn't reject the embryo. The work of the placenta, and the body, in creating a space for what is not of it, for what is essentially alien, has drawn much

scientific attention. The answer, in short, appears to be that pregnancy switches off a person's normal immune response, allowing the non-self to be held within the self.

Considering the foetus as other, alien or intruder, is a comfort to me. For it acknowledges just how very strange this being might seem to a mother. It was this that was surprising on becoming a mother: just how entirely other the child, my children, were, and remain to me. How they repeatedly defy expectations of recognition, and sameness. Biological, or biographical similarity there may be, but what is much more apparent is how unpredictable, unknowable, how alien the child is.

◆

Rhizomatic, is the word the woman I've met for a swim uses. We're in Galway for a symposium on *matrilineage*, but now away from the conference rooms we're agreed: the motherlines have shifted, the learning is coming at us sideways not downwards. We've skipped the morning panels to swim, and I'm wondering what I've let myself in for having said to her when we met at the pre-conference drinks, that *yes,* I was *a sea swimmer*. *I mean I swim, in the sea,* I didn't say, and she's been sidling up to me with talk of suits and hats and boots and floats and now we're at the coast and I'm there in just my swimsuit, and she's zipping something up, and I'm just in my swimsuit ready for a swift plunge and she says, handing me the chafe balm, *rhizomatic, maternal sharing*, yes, it's not a passing down of a legacy from generation to generation, but a sharing sideways, it's a living, breathing, writhing, folding, slipping, sinewing sideways, it's together and it's against, it's a bit underground and a bit through the ether, it's a bit whispered and it's a bit shouted, it's lots of cups of coffee and phone calls and lots of village halls and lots of unexpected others and lots of books, the books, yes. She ran a breastfeeding cafe for years, she says, and she worked while raising her kids and now, now she has time to *feck off* from symposiums into the sea. And here we were, ready to plunge. It's still and we can see the hills of Clare across Galway Bay.

◆

Feminism has tended to avert its eyes from the pressing question of overpopulation. That women should have control over their own bodies and choice as to whether or not, as well as when, and how, to procreate has been fundamental in the feminist project and meant that the matter of the population has not been wrangled with as it surely must be.

Yes. And the eternal duel, that duet between maternity and ecology, between feminism and care, the coupling and uncoupling, the strident taking of sides will go on.

Yes. And also, there's a small sidenote flickering in my head about the acute potency of maternity to dramatically revision notions of selfhood and kinship. The capaciousness of body and mind that it presses on the individual. The dismantling, deleting and simultaneous smashing open of that individual and of any sense of individual-ness hitherto clung to that it provokes.

◆

The sea is drawn up like a sheet across the bay and I'm grateful for this, for the quiet that will hold our bodies, but will also allow me to swim stretched and slow, untousled. I forget what words we share out there as we pitch our bodies into the centre of the bay, as we swim alongside talking, and as we leave one another to swim on lone adventures. I don't think we talked of the sort of multispecies beings motherhood has made of us, nor of our own rhizomes, our own tendrils that wriggle out from us making our attention manifold. I don't think we acknowledged that while swimming, while conversing, we were also attending to our other beings, thinking and feeling through them, that our watery bodies were also writhing in other bodies.

But perhaps we didn't need to name these things. Or, perhaps they were spoken in the strokes of our arms through the water, in the beat of our stretches forwards and outwards as we swam along the coastline, in our bodies submerged in other, vaster bodies. Perhaps that word she had held out to me, *rhizomatic*, spoke between us too, as the water between each of us, between us and the land, was not so much a separation but a relation. Perhaps we needn't have spoken at all.

◆

In light of the population and ecological crises, Donna Haraway proposes that we: *Make Kin Not Babies!* Her slogan is an important one, it recognises and challenges the reification of the nuclear family, and calls for reframing of modes of kinship to include others, human and non-human, for making kin across the non-familial, the non-natal, and the unfamiliar.

There's a suggestion held in the slogan that *making babies* is easy and familiar, that paths are already mapped, same is reproduced of same, while *making kin* is not. But as I read Haraway's work, what I notice is not how making babies is reviled in favour of other kinds of kinship, but rather, that her proposals for making kin speak to my own experiences of mothering. I wonder if making babies might be inscribed within, not divided from, her visions for kinship. For, to mother requires my imagination and my curiosity in ways beyond those I ever imagined.

While on paper, to make babies is to make same of same, what surprises is how other, unrecognizable, how *unfamiliar* the baby can be. Nor is making babies limited to the nuclear family, to heterosexual, dyadic partnerships; it does not abide by strict conventions. Motherhood itself stretches beyond biology, to encompass numerous non-biological and non-lactational configurations, and each one incurs a profound and defamiliarising encounter with an other. The lived reality of motherhood, of kin natal and other-than-natal, need not be other to making kin, but one in a plethora of means of conceiving of kinship.

Mothering calls into being extreme encounters with my others, calls me to know a radical other at close proximity. It calls for deep modes of attention, and splitting that attention twice, thrice, more. The fantasy of the bounded, autonomous self is slashed apart and selfhood is recohered as a fragmented, effaced, multiple, plastic state of being. To mother is to be called to the fiery present again and again and, on a day-to-day and relentless basis, is to be entwined in myriad ongoing relational, spatial, temporal, matter-ful and meaning-ful configurations.

It doesn't push me inward, close me down on or around my family, it throws me outwards, pushes me to previously unencountered capacities to comprehend others and otherness. Knowing an alien being inside my body, say, or pressed up against it, tripping alongside another, thinking for them, feeling for them, inhabiting their body as well as, more than, my own, loving this other and through that love coming to know my capacities to love. Knowing and not knowing simultaneously and

both deeply, encountering life through this other's eyes, their emotions, their frustrations, being constantly thrown to the ground, tipped upside down, challenged, dismantled, hated, loved, failing and remaining open to encountering, to knowing and failing again… this is the sort of kinship that motherhood opens me to. Motherhood dares me to love.

◆

She is wearing a zip-front neoprene swimsuit, a neoprene skull cap, thermal webbed swim gloves and socks with liquid rubber sealed seams and biofuse aquatic earplugs; she's got a tow float hanging off her too. She's like a mother. That's my thought, looking at this woman I've met, this swimming, symposium-going friend I've made, she's like a figure of early motherhood, unable to go anywhere without slings and bags and wipe-clean this and that and snacks, sippy cup, buggy replete with carabiners to further extend the prosthetic possibilities of maternal being. Diving into the sea with her is like stepping out the door in those early days, that same sense of the unknown, of having to be prepared for the anything that might happen. All the stuff hinged to a maternal body, the many objects deemed necessary and ever proliferating, a body both enabled and encumbered by all the gear. She speaks to me of the wild and shapely many-limbed dextrous being a mother is. Yes there's a zany glory to this body with its numerous aquatic items grafted to it.

◆

Mothering remembers dependence: remembers that traced into our histories, into our fleshy organny beating selves, we have each known absolute dependency on an other. It derides independence as foolish, as flawed, and claims interrelatedness instead. It knows that interrelating doesn't mean compromising, but widening capacities for encounter, for what is possible, it means holding open, assuming a not-knowing in relation to others, an accepting and attuning to what is, in this moment. Mothering places me in the world and asks me to reconfigure how I am in the world. It espouses these dichotomies, these versions of selfhood, of self and other, of I and not I.

And then it skews them. The placenta doesn't reject the other but moves into symbiosis with it. No family is ever really nuclear.

◆

Rhizomatic: the sorts of underground connections being made sideways between mothers. Rhizomatic also: being mother.

I recall still the shift in ways of seeing the world that occurred one day in the Forest of Dean, when my attention was turned to the myccorhiza, the fungal network in symbiotic relationship with the roots. Network that is far more vast than the visible parts of the trees above ground that connects and communicates between trees. I saw then how trees aren't self-contained monoliths, but creatures living interconnected in a web of relation.

So, as a mother, I walk, teeming. Not monolithic, I trail mycorrhizal filaments from my fingers, from my eyelashes and from under my feet, in constant committed, inevitable communication and relation.

P O N D

I could tread a path around its edge in a few scant minutes, comprehend its limits with my bare feet. It is a pond, it's not a lake. It might be a large pond, but its circumference is entirely graspable. Unlike the sea, a pond is contained on all sides. But there's a slippage in the logic here, at this pond, a crisis of scale. Where it deviates from pondliness is in its depth. Its depth far exceeds my suppositions, far exceeds one's expectations of a pond. I have dived in, plunged downward as far as I can go, swum around looking for footholds, for markers or suggestions of a bottom. I have sunk myself feetfirst at various spots. Not methodically but with a whimsical stretching out of a limb here, there. Perhaps I eschew method because I have already divined the answer. From above the pond is black, it is unfazed by the moods of the sky, it is its own discrete entity. Clotted so it looks like it might clothe my skin on entering. When underwater, the greens, milky browns and yellows reveal their brightness. When pulling myself up the red ladder onto the pontoon above, the drips of water hanging to my skin are glassy. I haven't taken a plumb line nor donned goggles to investigate further. I know there's no point. I know the abysmal feeling I get when staring down into the water before diving in is because the pond has no bottom. I know a plumb line or, say, a full scuba kit would only reveal wet patches of colour blackening as the distance from the light above increased. I know that at a certain depth the black would be the same black and the same density as it appears to be on the surface and it would continue like that, black and viscous, endlessly downwards. After diving in and checking in on the colours beneath the surface, I return to the top and swim there. I rarely put my head under again. (I hear a pair of swimmers came away with ear infections earlier in the month.) But the dive is necessary, it's the shock of the cold clutching to every exterior part of the body, and it's the renewed realisation that, despite its plausibly pondlike appearance from the land above, the pond is boundless. Swimming at the surface is to be a body suspended above a sinkhole.

A now familiar state of being. I might call it comfortable.

Sometimes I swim lengths, but a length feels inappropriate to the shapeliness of this pond, so more often I swim around in a lazy, undirected fashion, checking in on the plants that grow at the edges. These sit on wooden jetties tacked to the side, false bottoms that swing a little and slide somewhat as I press my toes against them. The plants aren't growing in the pond itself but in plastic pots, as if driven over from the garden centre and dropped there. No sense of occasion. No sense of

wanting to recreate nature here either. No, the pleasure's in the artifice. Little plastic binds still knot the plants to their sticks, holding them perpetually upright. And labels hang from these sticks. The surfeit of pot, plant and jetty around the edge of the pond, not to mention the bloom of yellowgreen weed that pushes in from the banks and threatens to engulf the pond entirely, prevent my getting close enough to be able to read the labels while swimming. I can however see the rectangular pictures of the flowers that are due to appear. Any day now, for spring is well upon us and the sepals, still green, are on the point of unfurling. White labels hanging on white elastic, unmoving in the meek air. But it wouldn't be hard to imagine what's written on them, variations on a theme: *Strap like leaves, blossom appearing later. Flowering late spring. Plant en masse for maximum effect.*

◆

Mists rise off the pond this morning, condensing in the cold air. After I dive in, I perceive that someone else is swimming here with me. From the pontoon, the rising steam had obscured my fellow bather. We graze skins. It's not awkward, nor is it awkward the way we decide not to greet one another. Why would we? We continue our paths, sloppy both, side to side, rounded edge to rounded edge. We sketch fleeting patterns across the water. Our skins meet again as like minnows we shimmy around the pond. We let them meet. In unspoken agreement we fall into a shared routine. We move together, letting our cooling skins overlap. Then apart, unbunching. We move together again, mapping our skins onto one another's. The tips of both our meeting hands are watery pads. Our breath and the beat of our blood is one.

But I am not surprised when the steam dissipates in the heat of the rising sun to reveal the pond to be mine alone. I am not surprised because I know the pond itself is matterful, is a body not dissimilar to mine. And like it I am boundless.

I think we might be lovers.

◆

It is raining and I sit a while in my bathing costume on the jetty jutting out over the pond. You have learnt to read, a slow process of phonics and supported reading aloud, and suddenly now you venture alone into the worlds of fiction. You drag your books around with you, to mealtimes, into the bath. I don't know you, but I recognise the girl whose imaginary world is dearer to her than the real one. The rain is heavy, not hard, each drop is a fat splat on my skin and on the boards beside me. The joy of a world uninhibited by the eyes and opinions of others. Of your parents. I am already wet through when I dive in, but even so the water of the pond feels wetter. I emerge to the splatting of raindrops at eye level. As each drop hits the surface it is propelled upward again. It looks like the pond has grown fingers. Multitudes of bulbous watery fingers spring up over the pond stretching out.

I think it might have other lovers.

I don't know whether to warn you of the perils of living through books. I don't know whether to let you in on the secret that fantasy never delivers on its promise.

◆

Late spring. The irises are in flower, but neither the bloom nor the damselflies flicking around disguise the labels. Flashes of yellow and purple are echoed in miniature on the tags beneath them. The water is no warmer, no colder than a few weeks ago. But the way it envelops my body is ever so reassuring. It holds me in my unplotted movements around the pond. Not difficult to conjure another being here with me. And it knows my body so well. It recognises my contours as if it remembers our previous touching.

Yes, I am affected by how well it recollects me: it pre-empts my movements, recognises my quirks. Dare I say, though our encounters have always been shared, it knows me better than I know it.

A coldblooded love like this is new to me.

◆

It's a strange tame wilderness here. More fitting for its situation on the edge of the marsh than the twee flint and blue paint of the rest of the village. The pond is inky and nothing beats cooling the body in it. Swifts flash low over the water. One just misses my face. Their tails are longs vees. Their tummies scuff the pond's surface sending ever-widening, ever-lengthening tremors radiating across it. These I watch without longing.

Between my last swim and this, the water lilies have come into flower. They look like they're made of sugar, meant to decorate the top of a cake. Whites and pinks, they're perfectly pastel. But even this gloopy water would dissolve sugar. When I catch it unawares, I see how keen it is to dissolve me. How it softens my edges. No, the lilies won't stay sugary sharp like this for long. The pond is an all-enveloping lover. Only by sporadically lifting my hands and legs out of the body of water can I reassure myself that our symbiosis isn't one-sided, that I am not being unknowingly dissolved.

◆

The summer holidays have started and you come to the pond with me. Your siblings are still at nursery. You want to swim but I won't let you. I'm not sure you've encountered this sort of depthlessness before, and if you have, you haven't comprehended it. You'd panic, and with your thrashing the pond would drop you. I know its ways. We'll go to the sea, I promise. So you pull off your shoes and tuck your skirt into your knickers and dangle your feet in the pond. You call me to watch you climb up and swing from the ladder, right out over the pond, one arm behind you, your head back and your throat to the sky. You are a bird, arching into flight. I am too absorbed by the pond to notice you.

A friend joins us, her child is asleep in the buggy. Later she sends me the photos she took of you and me. I can't see the shared features that people comment on, how alike we look, but I do notice how we both arch our backs over the water and bare our throats to the sky like that. I do notice how the water is black and cloying in the photos too. The white spots, those, are bubbles made by my movement. And how in the water my body is diffuse.

◆

You gather your swimming costume and a towel and once your brother and sister are asleep we head to the coast for a swim. I promised. We leave our clothes at the car and climb over the bank to the sea. It's not still as when I last swam here; the waves are churning up the shingle and crashing down on the beach. You're unperturbed but still we cling to each other as we walk out beyond the waves, part carrying, part floating. Difficult to know, the floor shelving like this, if you're out of your depth. But then you let go of me and swim away. Just like that. You swim away and across the splashy water I watch you pedalling arms and legs, your head cheerfully high. Then you turn around and swim back. You hang around my neck. Then you swim away. Smiles repeat on both our faces as you swim back, then away again.

It's getting late and you want to stay out. We sit on the beach wrapped in towels and watch the sun slide down into the sea, watch it shapechange, until it's an orange lozenge on the horizon, until it slips away. You gather stones you like, dropping them into your towel and carrying them back to the car between your legs. You pile them up on the dashboard and for the rest of the summer I drive around with a miniature blue, grey and white beach sliding around the ledge by the windscreen.

◆

Summer is busy with you all and I don't go to the pond. But out of the corner of my eye I catch sight of my hands and feet still webbed. And the pond, odourless during our romance, has left its smell on my skin. When no one is looking I turn my head to my shoulder and sniff. Algae, water, plastic pots, love, I can smell them all. I inhale.

I fear that once the holidays are over the pond will be too cold to swim in. I am nervous to think of the sharp edges that will appear once the spring growth has died back.

I'm not even sure, with the turn of the air, and the light, the spentness that Autumn brings, whether I'll continue to visit it.

Sometimes the Writer Is Also the Mother: Writing Maternal Subjectivity

INTRODUCTION

""The writer is someone who plays with his mother's body," Barthes wrote. But sometimes the writer is also the mother'.[1]

Maggie Nelson's observation in her 2015 memoir, *The Argonauts*, doesn't read simply as a rebuttal of Roland Barthes' statement, rather it acknowledges, and writes back to, several persistent strands of thought as to what 'the writer' is and what 'the mother'. Her remark recognises embedded within Barthes' the intimation that the two, writer and mother, cannot collide. Moreover, it highlights a long history of psychoanalytic thought in which the mother has been positioned as the 'object' or 'other', and an equally long, if not rather longer, history of literature in which the mother has tended not to be subject, but subject matter.[2] It's a resonant statement, for in her insinuation that the mother might *sometimes* be the writer, Nelson repositions 'the mother', object, in the status of *subject*, thereby challenging the othering of the mother intrinsic to both psychoanalysis and literature. In so doing she stakes out a literary terrain in which 'the mother' might be the subject, the writing 'I'.

Nelson's comment appears somewhat belated in its echo of one made almost forty years earlier by Susan Rubin Suleiman in her essay 'Writing and Motherhood'. Suleiman likewise takes issue with Barthes' statement, albeit in a different translation, asking 'what about the writer who *is* "the body of the mother"?'. 'Is this a foolish question', Suleiman continues, 'Does the mother who writes write exclusively as her own mother's child?'.[3] That the mother is a subject only in relation to her own mother or 'to her child, never in her own right' is subject too of Marianna Hirsch's 1989 *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, in which Hirsch notes that 'as a mother her subjectivity is under erasure'.[4] Such is the dilemma of the maternal subject: she is not one.

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[1] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), p. 40. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[2] Marianne Hirsch states of the mother in psychoanalytic history: 'in her maternal function, she remains an object, always distanced, always idealised or denigrated, always mystified, always represented through the small child's point of view', *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 167. Susan Rubin Suleiman describes the mother's status as 'the essential but silent Other, the mirror in whom the child searches for his own reflection, the body he seeks to appropriate, the thing he loses or destroys again and again, and seeks to recreate', 'Writing and Motherhood' in *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, ed. by Moyra Davey (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), pp. 113-137 (p.117).

[3] Suleiman, p. 118.

[4] Hirsch, pp. 167, 170.

As for the mother as writer, Suleiman allies cultural expectations and social conditions to these psychoanalytic discourses, declaring that 'mothers don't write, they are written'.[5] Based on notions that 'the ideal mother has no interests of her own', that to write would be to shirk maternal duties, and that motherhood as creative impulse replaces all other creative impulse, Suleiman argues that the two theoretical positions, one psychoanalytical, one social, are not indistinguishable but intertwined.[6] Or rather that '[i]t took psychoanalysis to transform moral obligation into a psychological "law", equating the creative impulse with the procreative one and decreeing that she who has a child feels no need to write books'.[7] 'It is time to let mothers have their word', she concludes.[8]

It is not that Nelson is late to the game, rather the fact that Suleiman's 1979 call remains current today is telling. It is telling as to how entrenched these ideas are, and as to just how difficult it has been to shake them. However, a recent spate of writing that 'invest[s] with speech the silence that defines maternal experience' attests to a long-overdue puncturing of this configuration.[9] This writing, in which Nelson's *The Argonauts* features centrally, identifies a space in which the maternal subject can begin to be articulated. It is here, in this space in which the writer is explicitly *also the mother*, and which gives shape to the lived reality of motherhood, that my enquiry situates itself.

In this PhD thesis, I set out to study the writing emerging from this space. I ask what traits are common to these texts and, by putting them in conversation with critical material on motherhood, ask what can be deduced from these commonalities about maternal subjectivity.

WRITING MATERNAL SUBJECTIVITY

While the erasure of the maternal subject in psychoanalysis forges the bedrock from which this enquiry stems, it is not this but the writing of maternal subjectivity that is the focus of my enquiry. Psychoanalysis remains henceforth in the background, and I turn to literature in order to draw from it something of this subjectivity. I alight on three elements that feature across this writing as they do across maternal experience: interruption, effacement and objects. Constitutive both of maternal experience and of potential ways in which this experience can be thought, these figures have been selected precisely for their concurrence in life and in literature. In choosing to call them figures I am foregrounding their figurative potential – their potential to call up, stand in or speak for other things. Each figure forms the central pivot of one of the three sections of my thesis.

[5] Suleiman, p. 117.
[6] Suleiman, p. 116.
[7] Suleiman, p. 119.
[8] Suleiman, p. 120.
[9] Hirsch, p. 169.

Their designation as such is important for there is no implicit teleological direction to the study, rather they work as points around which my readings cluster. I seek to reclaim forms of maternal praxis in order to sketch out more fitting configurations of maternal subjectivity and simultaneously, by attending to the formal elements common to this writing, to construct a poetics of motherhood.

I understand maternal subjectivity to refer to how a mother experiences herself in the world. This is not to imply that this subjectivity precedes the writing or vice versa, rather that, as becomes apparent in the body of the thesis, just as lived subjectivity might inform the writing, so the writing might construct this subjectivity. Attention here is placed on material experience, as can be seen in the choice of figures – interruption, effacement, objects. Each relates to a material aspect of motherhood, be it that of a mother's thought being interrupted by a child, of the effacement of the cervix in labour, or of the physical objects that a mother surrounds herself with in her mothering practice. This materiality extends to an attention on embodiment. I consistently seek to centralise embodied experience, recognising mothering as a bodily practice, and thus to establish a subjectivity that is physiological as it is psychological, that is experienced in the body as it is in the mind.

Moreover, this understanding of maternal subjectivity does not seek to encompass the whole range of maternal experience but attends to an often-heightened period that is repeatedly the focus of the texts. This period tends to extend from pregnancy, through labour and giving birth to the first two years of motherhood, inhabiting a timeframe in which mothering is arguably at its most acute. This is equally a stage in which the infant is yet to acquire language. As Andrea Brady puts it in *Mutability: Scripts for Infancy,* 'when you begin to speak for yourself I'll have to stop […] By then we'll finally begin to know you on your own terms'.[10] It could then be said that this maternal writing arises from the infant's prelinguistic state, that the mother's task is to give linguistic form to this unlanguaged time. 'Maternal subjectivity' here therefore does not refer to the whole temporal scope of motherhood but to its very earliest manifestations, and the experiences this study is concerned with are almost exclusively those of pregnancy, birth giving and early motherhood.

The first two sections, on interruption and effacement, work as a pair. My concerns therein are predominantly formal: I establish a reciprocity between maternal experience and maternal literary form and consider ways in which these very real experiences, of interruption and effacement, might illuminate a maternal poetics. I begin each section with a reading of the first

[10] Andrea Brady, *Mutability: Scripts for Infancy* (London: Seagull Books, 2012), p. 107. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

poem of Andrea Brady's *Mutability: Scripts for Infancy,* a text which I return to throughout the thesis, and which here steers me towards each of the figures. I perform a similar manoeuvre in both sections: an impediment is re-envisioned as a site of potential, and both aspects, impeding and generative, are held in place simultaneously.

In my work on interruption, the reading of *Mutability* recognises an antagonism between the labour of the poet and that of the mother, one caused by the breaking into thought and into speech that an infant enacts. Through a reading of interrupted moments in a number of maternal texts, including those by Sarah Ruhl, Arielle Greenberg and Rachel Zucker, and Alice Notley, I begin by conceiving interrupted writing as a direct material response to the equally material practice of mothering. I ask whether interruption might be conducive to making literature and I then look beyond this to acknowledge specific ways of thinking and being in the world that the writing attests to. This section recognises that both elements, antagonistic and creatively generative, exist simultaneously; that interruption might make things possible just as it hinders them.

Taking my lead once again from the opening poem of *Mutability*, in the second section, I attend to what is absent, or 'effaced' from the poem, thus prompting a study of effacement. The term 'effacement' here encompasses a mother's sense of loss of self, effacement of the cervix and effacement on the page. By incorporating cervical effacement into the study, I draw a connection between psychical and somatic experiences, one which elaborates my construction of embodied maternal subjectivity. I use this figure of effacement, employing both the wide metaphorical sense and the concrete definitions, to continue to construct a poetics of motherhood through a reading of works by writers including Joanna Walsh, Rachel Cusk and Lynda Schor. In line with the critical manoeuvre of the previous section, I come to read effacement not as either absence or presence, but as a presence upon an absence, an ambivalence, where both elements sit side by side.

The third section, on objects, marks a shift in my focus. Where in previous sections I attend to how a maternal subject perceives herself, here I look at how she perceives what is external to herself. Simply put, from the 'I', I look now to the 'it', moving outwards from the closeness of the confessional stance to look to objects. The value of this turn in my attention is twofold: it enables me to engage with the topos of maternity, predominantly the private domestic sphere in which maternity is enacted, and thereby with the breaching of this space. It also gives me an opportunity to situate a mother in the world. As such it differs staunchly from a study of maternal subjectivity that is focussed solely inwards: by placing her in the world, I offer a depiction of the maternal subject who is not insular, domestic, concerned only with her infant and her self, and nor is she portrayed as the sole focus of attention. I look to how objects might inform my understandings of maternal subjectivity and of the specific ways in which this subject engages

with the world. As such, my study of maternal subjectivity begins to write a story of maternal orientation.

In keeping with the previous sections, this one begins with a reading of a poem, or 'script', taken from *Mutability*, which occasions a study of objects. This section works at the limits of the maternal subject, the point at which this subject meets the world, and, through readings of Elisa Albert, Doireann ní Ghríofa and Claire Jarvis, considers how a mother extends beyond herself into her relations with those objects used and encountered in the practice of mothering. In so doing, it troubles the limits of the mother and sketches new contours of the embodied maternal subject, cracking open the term 'embodiment' to implement it in the objects themselves. It thereby ensures embodied maternal subjectivity's applicability to non-gestational and non-lactational mothering practices. In a neat resonance with previous sections, I end by conceiving that a mother inhabits a mobile, dual position, that of call *and* response, when not 'somewhere in between' (Brady, p. 85).

METHODOLOGY

My enquiry is consistently two-pronged: it searches to delineate both something of maternal writing *and* something of maternal subjectivity. In order to fulfil this dual project, my attention is turned to both the formal elements apparent in the writing and to mothers' material circumstance and embodied experience. The lens through which I look is broadly phenomenological, or experiential, in its attention to how a mother experiences herself in the world, and to 'what mothers *do*, not what they *are*'.[11] Beyond this, my methodological approach is a confessional, and affirmative one. This mode of enquiry is informed directly by the experiences, politics and aesthetics attested to in the texts themselves. To write in a confessional register, from the point of view of a maternal first person, is to echo that elected by the writers, and allies itself with the project of voicing maternal subjectivity. Adrienne Rich writes in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* that '[i]t seemed to me impossible from the first to write a book of this kind without being often autobiographical, without often saying "I"'.[12] As per Rich, it would be 'impossible' not to, and moreover, to not do so would be a performative contradiction, a disavowal of the work under consideration. Rather, aligning my work with a project of de-essentialising, I strive to inhabit a form that will, to use Hirsch's words, 'grant [mothers] agency, initiative, and subjectivity'.[13] My affirmative position similarly takes its orientation from the texts themselves. It seeks to reclaim

[11] Hirsch, p.175.
[12] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 15.
[13] Hirsch, p.175.

specifically maternal forms of lived experience, to endorse these, and to read them as sites of potential. My stance is one in which I consistently ask: might there be a reading in which the allegorical 'pram in the hall' is not impediment but conducive to making literature?

The practice of extrapolating from the experiential to the theoretical is one that situates itself explicitly within feminist methodologies. This is not to say that it is without contention. There is necessarily a tension that arises when making the personal political, a risk in appearing to privilege a certain viewpoint or experience, or to suggest that a single case study might be exemplary of a whole. Indeed, managing the relation between the specific and the general, and between individual and collective, is a challenge of the genre, one that I am equally conscious of in my writing as in that under scrutiny. In admitting a form of confession in this PhD I am constantly treading the line between making the lens too singular or making the error of generalising – this work tentatively sits on the border. However, the value it incurs can be best understood by framing it so as to recognise its performativity: this deliberate practice of writing as 'the reader in the process of reading, the embodied critic' does not seek to *centralise* the self so much as *operationalise* it, to use it as a means of thinking about a wider experience.[14]

I am steered by a theorist whose methodology is likewise driven by the relationship between the subjective and its wider theoretical signification and whose work has been invaluable in the project of articulating maternal subjectivity. Psychologist Lisa Baraitser's *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* is a study that blends personal anecdote and theory, in an attempt to get at this elusive thing, maternal subjectivity, and is hugely influential in my own reading of motherhood, forming much of the critical underpinning of this thesis.[15] Maternal subjectivity she understands to be 'a transitory state, revealed through numerous "hiccups", or unaccommodations in the daily lived experience of mothering' (p. 11). In her study she attends to these 'minor, transitory, mundane, silly or occasional' instances, looking to see what possibilities might arise from them, resisting as she does so her 'own impulses to try to build new models for subjectivity that solidify and reify experience, processes to which "the mother", as metaphor, figure, or trope, is particularly vulnerable' (p. 3). I apply these three elements of her methodology to my own work: first, a concern with the personal, local and everyday; second, an attention to what possibilities might arise from 'overlooked' instances or objects encountered in the practice of mothering; third, an opposition to treating maternal subjectivity as something that can be pinned down or fixed. Rather, like Baraitser, I hold to the transitory nature of maternal subjectivity. I thus occupy a form

[14] Rachel Brownstein, 'Interrupted Reading', in *Confessions of the Critics,* ed. by H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 29-39 (p. 32).
[15] Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (London: Routledge, 2012). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

that is not definitive and categorical, but one that reflects the dynamism and mobility of this fleeting subject. As such, my stance mirrors that of the writing, which eschews this sort of fixedness. To borrow words from that other key text in this study, *Mutability*, in my methodological practice I endeavour to 'catch rather than cauterize' (p. 6).

BODY OF WORK

The publication in 2001 of Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work*, to a furious backlash (mostly from other mothers), was a watershed moment for maternal testimony. As Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett wrote recently in her *Guardian* column, 'Republic of Parenthood', 'Perhaps largely because of Cusk, honesty about motherhood is not as taboo as it once was.'[16] But *A Life's Work* didn't pave the way for 'honesty about motherhood' alone, rather it set the bar for a new kind of maternal writing. Regarding the 'swift and brutal' reaction the book originally received, Cosslett adds:

> Its erudition was clearly part of it. It does not do to be too intelligent about motherhood. It undermines a deeply held notion that it is the preserve of instinct, that mothers dwell in a place of ingrained nurturing, and that to critique it is unnatural.[17]

And this is the point: *A Life's Work* opened the gates for a flood of intelligent, erudite, often irreverent and formally inventive texts about motherhood. These texts are described by Lauren Elkin as a 'countercanon', for '[t]hey read against the literary canon with its lack of interest in the interior lives of mothers, against the shelves of "this is how you do it" books, and against the creeping hegemony of social-media motherhood'.[18] This project supersedes that of testimony then and concerns itself with a movement that seeks to critique and counter the normalising and centring of less 'honest' accounts of maternal experience. As such, in a step to desacralise and to oppose the notion of the perfect, idealised mother, who has no interests of her own, many of these writers subscribe to D. W. Winnicott's concept of the 'good-enough mother'.[19]

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[16] Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, 'Writing honestly about motherhood still provokes anger, but we must tell our stories', *Guardian*, 6 June 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jun/06/writing-honestly-about-motherhood-still-provokes-anger-but-we-must-tell-our-stories> [accessed 9 June 2022]

[17] Cosslett, 'Writing honestly about motherhood still provokes anger, but we must tell our stories', *Guardian*, 6 June 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jun/06/writing-honestly-about-motherhood-still-provokes-anger-but-we-must-tell-our-stories> [accessed 9 June 2022]

[18] Lauren Elkin, 'Why All the Books About Motherhood?', *Paris Review*, 17 July 2018 <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/07/17/why-all-the-books-about-motherhood/> [accessed 9 June 2022]

[19] D. W. Winnicott, 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena: A study of the first not-me possession', in *Influential Papers from the 1950s*, ed. by Andrew C. Furman and Steven T. Levy (London: Routledge 2001), pp. 203-223 (p. 213).

The texts under scrutiny in my PhD fall into this *countercanonical* category. Not all of them fall into the post-Cusk era; I look to earlier texts and poetry when these exemplify the experiences I have sought to investigate. I return frequently to the poems or 'scripts' in *Mutability*, which depict the first two years of the poet's daughter's life (a period of time from June 2008 to July 2010), and which while often dated do not appear in chronological order. These poems work as waymarks through the thesis. The other texts under consideration, while spanning genres and decades and making for a richly eclectic group, concur in 'their unerring seriousness, their ambition [and] the way they demand that the experience of motherhood in all its viscera be taken seriously as literature. They put the mother and her perspective at the centre of their concerns'.[20] While the breadth appears to defy specific genre distinction, all the texts in this thesis fit loosely into a sub-genre defined by Laura Di Summa-Knoop as 'critical autobiography'. Differing from memoir per se, 'the critical autobiography flirts closely with fiction and literary criticism,' Di Summa-Knoop writes, 'while challenging some of the structural and aesthetic features that characterise more traditional autobiographical works'. To this she adds that

> critical autobiographies problematize the idea of an authentic confession, they refrain from causal narrative connections, and […] they further contribute to the discussion of the nature of the self by providing a perhaps more scattered, but nonetheless compelling picture of what a contemporary autobiographical self might actually be.[21]

Her depiction is fitting, for it recognises a category of writing that doesn't seem to obey narrative or autobiographical conventions, while successfully forging a version of selfhood. Baraitser recognises a similar characteristic in maternal stories, which, she writes, do not lend themselves to 'grand narrative', but make instead for 'a series of unconnected experiences that remain fundamentally unable to cohere' (p. 15). The formal aesthetics common to this body of work include bittiness, gappiness, splintering, fragmentation, polyphony, and shifting pronouns. As such they frequently frustrate any attempt to produce a coherent subject and resist the possibility of a singular interpretation, depicting disparate, or dispersed (interrupted, effaced, object-encumbered) selves, thus concurring with Di Summa-Knoop's identifying of a 'scattered […] autobiographical self.'

Moreover, just as Cosslett highlighted *A Life's Work's* erudition, so Di Summa-Knoop describes critical autobiographies as 'somewhat brainy'. This she refines, explaining that 'they

[20] Elkin, 'Why All the Books About Motherhood?', *Paris Review*, 17 July 2018 <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/07/17/why-all-the-books-about-motherhood/> [accessed 9 June 2022]
[21] Laura Di Summa-Knoop, 'Critical Autobiography: A New Genre?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 9, 1 (2017), 1-12 (p. 1).

assert a life while analysing it according to a multiplicity of standards'.[22] This act of analysing is apparent in Nelson's remark with which I began, and often finds form in the mingling of criticism, essay, poetry and fiction of this sub-genre. The texts under scrutiny here thereby query the maternal subject just as they write it. Indeed, they appear to be responding to Baraitser's call for 'accounts of maternal experiences that move the mother away from containers and receptacles altogether, that have other shapes and contours' (p. 21).

The dominant note in maternal writing continues to be white, middle-class and cisgender. 'Why' when motherhood is universal ('after all, even if we've not all given birth we have all been born'), asks Huma Qureshi in an article in the *Guardian* in 2019, 'are all the motherhood memoirs so white'? To this she responds:

> Put simply: it is already hard enough to be published if you're a writer of colour. It's also harder if you're a woman. Harder too if you're a mother, battling for the time to write and raise a family. Put it all together – a woman writer of colour who is also a mother – and our odds of being published are slim.[23]

But this landscape is changing. The role of African-American writing in forging the motherhood canon that we do have today, notably the works of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou, and the absolutely foundational status of this African-American lineage, is increasingly being acknowledged. Moreover, not only has Qureshi since published two books, a short story collection, *Things we do not Tell the People we Love*, and a memoir, *How we Met*, both of which touch on motherhood, but a number of texts on the subject from the perspective of other ethnicities have appeared to great acclaim. These include Pragya Agarwal's personal study of motherhood from the point of view of a woman of South Asian heritage, *(M)otherhood*, Avni Doshi's Booker-shortlisted *Burnt Sugar,* and the English translation of Mieko Kawakami's highly feted, *Breasts and Eggs*.[24] These publications attest both to a changing landscape and to a readership hungry for other perspectives. What defines the current moment then is a rapidly-changing conversation about motherhood, one that is redefining the literature and the versions of maternal subjectivity that are being written. My work inserts itself within this conversation, sitting at the intersection of

[22] Di Summa-Knoop, p. 11.
[23] Huma Qureshi, 'Why are all the motherhood memoirs so white?', *Guardian*, 3 September 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/03/mothers-white-women-of-colour-reflected-books> [accessed 24 June 2022]
[24] Qureshi, *Things we do not Tell the People we Love* (London: Sceptre, 2021), *How We Met: A Memoir of Love and Other Misadventures* (London: Elliott & Thompson, 2021); Pragya Agarwal, *(M)otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2021); Avni Doshi, *Burnt Sugar* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2020); Mieko Kawakami, *Breasts and Eggs* (New York: Europa Editions, 2020).

maternity and feminism, but by no means does it pretend to complete the picture. The paucity of work on maternity means that other intersections, particularly those of maternity with class and with race, remain all but scantly illuminated. Nor are these mutually exclusive areas, but mutually enforcing, and this work positions itself within the collective effort to elucidate something of motherhood, of maternal subjectivity, and of maternal literature – this project to, together, give voice to a 'subjectivity [that] is under erasure.'

NOMENCLATURE

In this vein, the question of nomenclature and gendering is an important one. Once again, I have looked to the texts themselves for guidance in my decisions as to terminology. The recent advocating for inclusive terminology across maternity services and its appropriate application in 'individualised person-centred care' is valid and timely.[25] This 'approach has been carefully considered to be inclusive of trans and non-binary birthing people without excluding the language of women or motherhood', similarly, my decision to use the term 'mother' and the gender 'she' reflects the gender identities of those whose testimonies I am working on.[26] In using these terms I do not seek to privilege cisgender motherhood nor to deny the significance of other perspectives, rather to map out the area under concern in this thesis. 'Mother' I define loosely as someone who 'has a child alongside,' in response to Baraitser's question, 'What is it like to be alongside a child' (pp. 25-6). I thereby explicitly include non-gestational as well as gestational experiences of mothering. I move between the use of the words 'motherhood' and 'mothering', with a preference for the second which recognises agency, mobility and practice, where the first might be read as a fixed condition, or the patriarchal institution of motherhood.[27]

In my decision to use the term 'mother' over 'parent', I also align myself with the stance taken by Eula Biss in her work *On Immunity*:

> After my son's birth, I found myself in constant conversation with other mothers and the subject of our conversation was often motherhood itself. These mothers helped me understand how expansive the questions raised by mothering really are. In recognition of

[25] Cosslett, 'The language of maternity is alive and well, so why not expand it to include trans parents?', *Guardian*, 5 May 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/05/language-maternity-trans-parents-parenthood-gender> [accessed 24 June 2022]

[26] 'Brighton NHS Trust introduces new trans-friendly terms', BBC, 10 February 2021 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-56007728> [accessed 24 June 2022]

[27] Rich distinguishes between motherhood as experience and as institution where the first refers to 'the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children' and the second to 'the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control', p. 13.

> the debt my thinking owes to them, I have chosen, throughout this book, to use the word *mothers* in places where I could have used the word *parents*. I am writing to and from the women who complicated the subject of immunization for me.[28]

Like Biss, I would like to acknowledge how much my own work is informed by the conversations I have had with other mothers about motherhood, and to recognise how they have contributed to this thesis. These conversations have repeatedly challenged, revised and sharpened my thoughts on the subject.

To speak of a lived female experience against a backdrop of post-feminism and of postmaternalism might seem archaic. Indeed, the more I write about motherhood, the more obsolete the notion seems to be: it is as if I am catching it just as it threatens to vanish. Medical advances and social changes have dramatically transformed how the term is understood, so much so that today it is under question: Elissa Marder calls her book *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, a response to the question what is 'meant by the term "mother"' (p. ix).[29] The British Medical Association's 2016 *Guide to Effective Communication* asks its employees to refer to 'pregnant people' rather than 'expectant mothers'.[30] Perhaps it is symptomatic of maternal subjectivity that it is being voiced at the very moment that it threatens to disappear. Or, perhaps, at this crux, on the point of vanishing, motherhood is at its most resonant.

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[28] Eula Biss, *On Immunity: An Inoculation* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2014), under 'Notes'.
[29] Elissa Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction* (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. ix.
[30] *British Medical Association Guide to Effective Communication 2016* <https://archive.org/details/2016BritishMedicalAssociationBMAGuideToEffectiveCommunication2016> [Accessed 24 June 2022]

I N T E R R U P T I O N

To begin with an incident outside
language, beyond recollection,
enforces the solidarity of our work
to build up into sound. Pethedine concussions
and a nozzle of oxygen to plead across
running like a horse, spare us
the knowledge that there is no knowledge
come rushing down, feral.
Effacing into perfect silence,
the working tongue in a yellow corridor. (Brady, p. 3)

'To begin with an incident outside language' is to begin using words at the very point that words fail. It is a brave, perhaps foolhardy, starting point, in which I read the hope of the poet. The hope that poetry will endow the outside-of-language with linguistic form. I also read the brave (perhaps foolhardy?) hope(s) of a mother bringing a child into the world; and the hope that the labour of poet and that of mother will be one of 'solidarity', for poet and child share a vocation: 'to build up into sound'. As I rise on the climax of this hope I recall how hope is often fraught with illusion, 'the knowledge that there is no knowledge come[s] rushing down' as 'the working tongue' is 'effac[ed] into perfect silence'.

It is a weak point of entry, to cram this, the first poem in Andrea Brady's *Mutability: Scripts for Infancy,* with my own antagonisms. Similarly, to try and root out an antagonism in a text that speaks of 'solidarity' between mother and child. But, I can't help but suspect that this 'solidarity' is concurrently a field for disaccord, that the child's 'build[ing] up into sound' will interfere with the poet's own.

This 'incident outside language', birth, is conceivably the first of a series of interruptions that the newborn will effect on the mother. The fabled first cry, that which enunciates the infant's arrival in the world, sounds out to call the mother's attention to her baby. If a writer's, in this case poet's, work is situated in her mind, in engaging with a flow of thought, or words, and in transferring this thought, these words, onto paper, then the cry establishes a point of conflict: it interferes with both the process of thought and that of writing. That 'incident outside language'

becomes an incident that breaks into language, into the very making of language that is the work of the poet.

In *Silences*, her book on how circumstance thwarts creativity, Tillie Olsen writes, 'More than in any other human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible. Children need one *now*.' It is this being called to the now that, for Olsen, renders 'the circumstances for sustained creation […] impossible', as '[w]ork interrupted, deferred, relinquished makes blockage – at best, lesser accomplishment'.[31] The instancy of interruption shocks the poet out of a state of reflection into a state of action, or *re*action. On cue, the infant's demands come to fill Brady's poems: 'You wake repeatedly in paroxysms of disaster', '[a]lways responding to emergencies, not forming, not making except by accident and by a general theory of kindness' (p. 23), 'the real work vanishes into thin air, I can't read or write', '[d]isappearance of intellectual ambition […] All time is stolen from you, sneaking up the stairs and hoping the giant won't realise we've absconded with the loot: a newspaper, the telephone, the language' (p. 35). The very real antagonism between position of poet and position of mother comes to the fore, the poems acknowledge the impossibility of being both a poet and a mother.

I write that and then I am obliged to rethink it. Beside me I have Andrea Brady's book. Not one poem scratched out while the baby napped, but 110 pages of prose and poetry, scripts for infancy, written during the first two years of her daughter's life. I have conceived of the birth of the infant as an interruption and, as with the proverbial pram in the hall, this to be impediment to the creative act, but the material existence of the book contradicts my premise. Indeed, the citations above (p. 23, p. 35), while depicting the intellectual frustrations felt by the poet on being called repeatedly to the infant's side, give poetic form to these frustrations – interruption hasn't hindered poetry so much as redirected it. The subject, and arguably mode, of poetic attention has shifted, making not for *no* poetry but for *other* poetry. If I nudge at this, extend it a little, I can begin to hypothesise that an infant's interruption might not thwart, but give to the creative process.

The idea that interruption might give is put forward by Baraitser in *Maternal Encounters,* where she sets out to draw potential from oft-obscured key moments of motherhood, those 'moments in which we are disturbed or dislodged by motherhood […] in minor, transitory, mundane, silly or occasional ways' (p. 11). She proposes that these 'overlooked instances in which we are wrong-footed or undone by mothering […] have in common a capacity to disrupt […] provid[ing] new points of departure'. Interruption is a case in point: 'in this elusive moment, the moment in which we are interrupted by the other, something happens to unbalance us and open

[31] Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (London: Virago, 1980), pp. 18-19.

up a new set of possibilities' (p. 69). If I apply this to the mother-writer, interruption need not be understood as synonymous with 'lesser accomplishment' but rather as conducive to opening up 'a new set of [literary] possibilities'. However, before considering further how interruption might act on literature, I will attend to the quality and effect of interruption, this event which 'forms the ground of maternal experience' (p. 74), in order to illuminate the terrain in which the mother-writer exists.

To inter-rupt is to break between. An interruption tends to be occasioned by another or an event outside of myself. This *external* event breaks into my *internal* world; that, there punctures this, here. An interruption stops; it diverts, redirects attention elsewhere; it disrupts, often frustrates, sometimes impedes. Fortunately, an interruption has a beginning and an end, it is a (hopefully short) diversion from whatever it is I, mother, am doing, and to which I return once the interruption is over. It is an erratic crack in the porcelain of life, so that if life were a vase, interruptions would run like disparate fissures, unpredictable, all over it. But this vase analogy is wrong. Life has nothing vase-like about it, and moreover the notion that I can return from an interruption to continue *as before*, is fanciful. An interruption effects change, in diverting attention it alters my state of mind; it takes up time, when I return I am no longer inhabiting the same moment as when I left off. And, all too often I do not return.

Interruption takes up time. It also recalls me to the now. Alongside the brash shout of the interruption itself, there is a whisper asking me to be mindful of the present. There's a tendency in notions of interruption to impose a prior state of continuity, but perhaps it is the presence of interruption that makes explicit the flow that it is breaking into, establishing that continuity only as it fragments it.

Interruption is considered such a fundamental element of mothering that, writes Baraitser, 'In some senses it is barely possible to conceive of maternal subjectivity outside of interruption' (p. 67). Interruption breaks between a mother and her thoughts, her conversation, her work, her sleep, even her dreams. Nothing is immune, everything can be broken into, or in between, just as the child slips between the bedclothes, or before that, slips out of the womb and cries out, or, and I have written that the cry is the first interruption but writing now, I come to think of the quickening', the early fluttering of foetus in womb reminding or preparing an expectant mother for her duty to another, so, from the point of conception a mother risks being shocked again and again out of her internal world to pay attention to another. If motherhood is synonymous with interruption, with this breaking, then the unified condition evoked by the '-hood' is not as it first appears. Condition contains something of the continuous, but persistently interrupted, motherhood is discontinuous. Effected by children, 'whose acts are irregular, unpredictable, often

mysterious', the interruptions are inconsistent and unforeseeable, no pattern can be drawn, they cannot be planned or prepared for, they are every time a shock.[32]

Interruption plays between sound and silence: itself full of sound, an interruption silences. As Baraitser intimates, the child's call to the mother is 'a command to silence' (p. 47). 'Mum!', 'Mum!', '*Mum!!!*', go the cries not just calling to attention, now, and again now, but calling to be 'mum', to shut up!

It is crucial to an understanding of motherhood to acknowledge that it is not a condition, not an unchanging state, but one that is punctured arrhythmically. If this illustrates something of the material conditions of mothering, the terrain a mother treads and the point from which a mother-writer writes, how then does this experience play out on the page?

Playwright Sarah Ruhl's interrupted essay 'On Interruptions' engages explicitly with this concern:

> The child's need, so pressing, so consuming, for the mother to be *there*, to be present, and the pressing need of the writer to be half-there, to be there but thinking of other things, caught me –
>
> Sorry. In the act of writing that sentence, my son, William, who is now two, came running into my office crying and asking for a fake knife to cut his fake fruit.[33]

Pressing both, the child's need for his mother and the writer's need to be in her thoughts. Here, the mother is writing when full-blast, mid-sentence, in rushes the child. The mother keels off her writer position and, I assume, returns to her mother position. She then returns to the position of writer to recount the episode. This happens a second time, and on the third occasion the text itself is interrupted by her son's typing on her keyboard: 'Perhaps that is equally 7. My son just typed 7 on my computer' (p. 4).

Contrived, this sort of text does not appear to hold much critical weight. A touch of humour, a clever trick, to write *interruptedly* about interruption. But to laugh it off is to fail to observe the value in it, for it captures exactly the experience of the mother-writer. Not exactly, it doesn't inform the reader how long the interruptions went on for, I can presume the fake knife was found but I don't know what was said in the interim. Perhaps the writer took the opportunity to make herself a cup of tea before returning to the text or did not return to it for several days. However, the instant of interruption is marked on the page by an unfinished sentence, an

[32] Sara Ruddick, 'Maternal Thinking', *Feminist Studies,* 6, 2 (1980), 342-367 (p. 352).
[33] Sarah Ruhl, 'On interruptions', in *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write* (New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 2014), pp. 3-6 (p. 3). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

incomplete thought and in so doing reproduces what Baraitser describes as 'the constant attack on narrative that the child performs: literally breaking into maternal speech, and as well as her own self-narrative, which is punctured at the level of constant interruptions to thinking, reflecting, sleeping, moving and completing tasks' (p. 15). Furthermore, mimetic writing acts beyond the private domestic scene of mother at desk writing, it acts beyond the page, it goes on to invade the reader's private situation. The immediacy of interruption acts on the reader too. As the writer is interrupted, so is she. She too grapples with unfinished sentences, incomplete thoughts. The frustrations inflicted upon the mother are likewise inflicted upon her. Considered through this lens, the somewhat artificial contrivance of this essay (signalled here by the fake knife, the fake apple) serves to striking effect – it is not that it immerses the reader in the mother's experience, but conversely that the mother's experience intrudes upon the reader's. This key-moment of motherhood, interruption, strikes out, and is experienced by the reader herself. The very real, very common event of interruption comes to be known in an arena (the literary artifice) usually sheltered from domestic disturbances.

In Ruhl's essay, the child's interruption acts on the grammar and the syntax of the writing, it truncates sentences, makes for gaps, blank spaces, em dashes, line breaks and for ideas that start afresh, leaving the last trailing. Interruption loses its frustrating quality: the writer is no longer frustrated (prevented) in her task of writing. And the interruptions, which were initially recognised at content-level, take shape on the page, they influence the written text and are visually apparent in the typography. In the co-written *Home/Birth: A Poemic*, where authors Arielle Greenberg and Rachel Zucker discuss the birth system in the United States, the presence of the child also acts at sentence level, not however skewing grammar so much as skewing meaning:

> In my last pregnancy the thought of the baby crowing was exciting to me. I mean it turned me on. Does that make me a freak? A witch? Oh, well.
> Do you mean crowing? Or crowning?
> "Crowning." Sometimes I am writing this with Judah on my lap. Sometimes while he is sleeping.[34]

Child on her lap, the mother's attention is divided between the work of writing and that of mothering. This makes for typos, and in turn for slippage in meaning. Crowning – the moment during labour when the crown of the baby's head becomes visible – here becomes 'crowing.' And

[34] Arielle Greenberg and Rachel Zucker, *Home/Birth: A Poemic* (1913 Press, 2011), p. 166. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

with 'crowing' other narratives rear their head alongside that intended. In 'crowing' I hear crying and I hear the infant's arrival into the world, their cry to attention. Crowing also speaks to me of crows, and then of changelings. These, in conjunction with the figure of the 'witch' cause the narrative to veer off course – I am thrown into folktale. The effect of the child's presence serves to bring other intimations into the discussion. Interruption again takes on a physical presence in the text, in the typography, and this has repercussions for the reader.

'On Interruptions' depicts a mother at a desk, typing, an open door to a room in which her child is playing, occasionally running in and out. In *Home/Birth*, there are two mothers present as well as several children and one foetus, ('The baby just kicked when I typed that' (p. 163)). The two mothers are co-writing, one pregnant, one with her son in her arms. Perhaps he's leaning against her dozing, and she's stretching around his sleepy body to write, or perhaps he's actively on her lap, swiping for the mouse, pressing his fingers against the screen. I envisage her sat at the kitchen table, and maybe the boy's eating something, a rice cake, say, and the crumbs are spilling onto her lap and onto the keyboard. The mode of writing here, the way in which writing is exercised, obliges me to revise my ideas about the work of writing, 'with all that such work implies of the will to self-assertion, self-absorption, solitary grappling'.[35] Writing isn't shut off from mothering, but in dialogue with it, one feeds into the other. Above I used the term 'divided' to speak of a mother's attention moving between her child and her work, but 'shared' would be more appropriate, for here the space of writing is indeed *shared* with that of mothering. The children (and foetus) breach the space of work and take on a physical presence in the text, they break into, interrupt, the thread of narrative, the typing itself. The writers aren't forcing a divide between the two worlds but opening one to the other. By adjusting their response to interruption these mother-writers resolve an antagonism and make of it a formal possibility. And, in desacralizing their work they resolve a conflict between their positions of writer and of mother, as Ruhl concludes: 'I found that life intruding on writing was, in fact, life. And that, tempting as it may be for a writer who is also a parent, one must not think of life as an intrusion' (p. 5).

These examples are suggestive of a specific kind of writing practice, one that Baraitser describes, with a nod to Rachel Blau du Plessis, as 'a praxis that does not explore or illustrate the personal, but through which the personal takes place' (p. 14).[36] Interruption takes place *through* the writing. This interrupted writing is a direct material response to the material practice of mothering. It is also a formal device through which interruption doesn't make for *no* writing but rather for *other* writing.

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[35] Suleiman, p. 122.

[36] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2006).

In Alice Notley's poem 'January', by foregrounding the child's voice, the 'ground of maternal experience' (Baraitser, p. 74), interruption, becomes the ground of the poem:

Mommy what's this fork doing?
What?
It's being Donald Duck.

What could I eat this?
Eat what?
This cookie.
What do you mean?
What could I eat it?[37]

At the beginning of the poem, 'Mommy' is elusive, far off, in her thoughts perhaps, or in her work, and appearing only through a series of 'what?'s. But the child's interruption has broken so intently into the work of writing that it is his voice that takes up the page, not the writer's. I have suggested interruption makes for gaps, blanks and arrested thought, but accompanying, or rather pre-empting the interruption is the child's voice. Here it is the voice, the sonic element of interruption, that finds form on the page. There's an echo in this child voice of the mechanics of interruption perceived in 'On Interruptions' and *Home/Birth*: the child's voice is again upending grammar, suggesting different orders of meaning. In the child's earnest 'What could I eat this?' I hear Ruhl's 'Perhaps this is equally 7'. But in this case the skewing is due to the child's own idiosyncratic language-making. As 'January' progresses, the mother's and the child's voices blur: the mother's sentences are unclear, broken, strewn with unconventional grammar and meaning, as the child's. Tense shifts about, 'That fish is dead. That fish got / dead today. That fish gets dead today, right?'. Part-phrases such as 'We're all about / as comprehensible as the crocuses', 'but / she meant my chairs', 'That's under what I keep trying out', 'A petal is crumpling I've done / before', 'My armpits smell like chicken soup' and 'I'm mostly staying seriously purple now' slide between adult tongue and child tongue, leaving the reader guessing, unable to differentiate between the two voices. 'I can't tell if they're / me or not', the mother states of her children. Mimicry is at work here, there are inflections of one in the other and neither is entirely divisible.

The poem appears to transcribe a series of communications between a talking child and a 'half-there' (Ruhl, p. 3) mother, and in so doing reaffirms that interruption is implicated in a child's

[37] Alice Notley, 'January' <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/notley/january.html> [accessed 25 February 2022]

communication with its mother. In this case, the child's interruptions, his erratic syntax and singular ways of seeing the world, don't *stop*, nor *break*, but instead they build, make the poem. As such, they resonate beyond the closed space of the poem to think about the making of language that happens between a mother and a child. This language appears to be determined by the relation. Just as a mother 'budges up to make room for another, and is radically changed in the process' (Baraitser, p. 49), so her language occasions a similar shift aside. The language-making happens in the space *in between* the child and the mother, it's a back and forth that is not owned by either interlocutor, but instead makes for its own language, one which may be unintelligible to those outside of the relation.

'We don't say often enough', writes Julia Kristeva in her lecture 'Motherhood Today', 'that the child's language acquisition implies that the mother also re-learns language.' For Kristeva, this parallel is founded in the 'projective identification of the mother and child', for 'the mother inhabits the mouth, lungs and digestive tube of her baby'.[38] Notley again: 'Bodily they're incomprehensible. I can't tell if they're / me or not. They think I'm their facility.' This sharing of bodily organs is a sharing of tongues, of language making. The mother accompanies the child's echolalia, thus, according to Kristeva, leading the child 'towards signs, sentences, stories' and to becoming a 'speaking subject'.[39] Child imitates mother, but mother also imitates child, understanding her child's idiosyncratic language rather than seeking to correct it, so the child's presence, its interruptions inform the construction of language.

There's a similar slipperiness of language in *Mutability:* the reader is unsure whether the phrase '[r]aising from cries to babble to speech' (p. 6) refers to the figure of the labouring mother or the newborn child, for both are coming out of silence, through cries into speech. Brady's book inhabits that period of time from newborn to speaking subject, for 'when you begin to speak for yourself I'll have to stop […] then we'll finally begin to know you on your own terms (p. 107) and the writing is made 'for […] and of' (p. 7) the unspeaking infant. The poetry depends on this coming into language together and the project is a shared one: 'to build up into sound' (p. 3). The sonic environment of infancy, cries, echolalia, babble… lowing, moaning, mooing… (p. 6) and the grammatical, syntactical and semantic diversifying that a child's language-making incurs become the matter, the substance, the physical attributes with which the poetry is constructed.

These examples push for a shift in attitude towards interruption. This antagonistic aspect of motherhood, said to inhibit the writer's work, instead becomes part of her arsenal of material for making literature. What was previously inhibiting becomes enabling, diluting the

[38] Julia Kristeva, 'Motherhood Today' <http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html> [accessed 25 February 2022]
[39] Kristeva, 'Motherhood Today' <http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html> [accessed 25 February 2022]

incompatibility between the writer position and the mother position. It nods towards a resolution: a space where writing and mothering cease to be at odds with one another and where the presence of a child/ren might offer material that enhances rather than stifles the creative process and the practical experience of mothering might permeate the text: 'not your infancy or my motherhood but both together, in-mixed with the writing' (Brady, p. 67). Indeed, Brady's words sound in my ears, reiterating the 'solidarity' of the work of mother-writer and child.

In building towards a poetics of motherhood, interruption acknowledges certain distinctive features, apparent in both form and content, of maternal writing: broken sentences, wayward grammar, slippery tenses and meanings and a suggestion of reciprocity between mother and child's voices. But beyond the parameters of the flits the elusive figure of a mother for whom this interruption is playing out in very real terms. A mother is, states Baraitser, 'a subject of interruption; both she who is subjected to relentless interruption and she whom interruption enunciates; a subject, that is, who emerges from the experience of interruption itself' (p. 67). Interruption gives rise to the maternal subject and elucidates something of this subjectivity. Just as 'the mother is born of the child's birth', so is she born of interruption.[40] This subject, mother, comes into being at the sound of that first cry. The cry both calls the mother into being and becomes the mother's calling. In her book *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood*, Naomi Wolf writes of her child's first cry: 'There is a cry. I do not recognize it.'[41] Baraitser records a similar experience:

> The nurse has to shake me awake to tell me my baby is crying. […] Now it dawns on me that cry is for my ears. I am the chosen audience for that cry. I must elect that child as my child by dint of my response to that cry. The cry comes to me from outside, from a creature I have not yet claimed as my own. (p. 57)

A mother's response to this cry – alien and outside of her – cements her identity as a mother. In both of these cases the mother doesn't recognise the cry. Her becoming-mother is hinged to an event that is unrecognisable and outside of her. Attention here is to the location of the cry, outside. The cry, this event of interruption is an external event. In the case of the texts that I have looked at, this external event is embraced, brought into the work. The case of lived experience is rather different. In responding to the cry, a mother is acknowledging the location of her subjectivity as

[40] Hélène Cixous, 'What is it O'Clock? Or the Door (We Never Enter)' in *Stigmata* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 73-109 (p. 104).
[41] Naomi Wolf, *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), p. 118.

outside of her, dis-locating, decentring or, to use Baraitser's term, unaccommodating her. Her subjectivity is a decentred, unaccommodated, interrupted one. And, this subject that emerges from an unknown cry, will henceforth be required to act in response to the unpredictable acts of her child/ren, a process that:

> calls on [her] to confront her own worst nightmares – her rage, aggression, hopelessness and despair, and mothers who spend long periods of day and night with their young children can find themselves feeling mentally, emotionally and at times physically bruised. (p. 68)

Writing this, I am filled with an overwhelming sense of the precariousness, the vulnerability of this figure, born of such inconsistency and unpredictability. To consider interruption simply as a formal device acting on a text is to risk ignoring this highly specific circumstantial and psychological reality at the core of a mother's existence. A reality that is also at the core of her thinking and writing. Interrupted writing is not just stylistic pyrotechnics, but gives access to the very being of this figure writing, confronting 'her own worst nightmares' and simultaneously caring for another. While my principal preoccupation here is indeed the writing, I am concerned that the material experience of mothering, and the material conditions in which the writing is made, not be erased in this attention to the far easier to delimit stuff of the text.

Erased is an appropriate term, for, despite my conjectures, much of the body of maternal writing I look at here does not make apparent a child's 'constant attack on narrative' (Baraitser, p. 15). Instead narrative norms prevail, the conventions of grammar and syntax are obeyed, entire sentences end with full stops and form parts of entire paragraphs. Interruption is inferred in the content of the texts, but the event is not performed on the page. It is subject matter, a frustration, an annoyance: 'the real work vanishes into thin air, I can't read or write' (Brady, p. 35). Writing doesn't tend to be distracted, interrupted, nor spasmodic at all. Other qualities, related to interruption and the material experiences of having a child alongside, are however apparent, and these are common to much of the body of maternal writing such as I am identifying here. Maternal writing is short, both the length of the book itself (typically between 90-150 pages), and the stretches of writing within are episodic, often only lasting a paragraph or two before a break, or a new page or new chapter begins, and these are interspersed with blank space. This blank space is representative of the interruptions. 'But here's the catch:', writes Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts,* '*I cannot hold my baby at the same time as I write'* (p. 37). Unable to simultaneously mother and write, writing more commonly happens when the writer puts the baby down, while it sleeps, or while it is being held by someone else – writing fills the bursts of time without children. '[P]lease forgive

the shortness of these essays', writes Ruhl, 'do imagine the silences that came between – the bodily fluids, the tears, the various shades of – ' (p. 4). The writing is made during the 'quick quick quick of your rest times' (Brady, p. 10), making for short bursts of texts, while these 'silences' or gaps in the texts imply the time spent mothering, or indeed holding the baby. In Mariana Thomas's reading, these 'large gaps between sentences and paragraphs leave the reader in an uncomfortable space, unable to sustain a sense of unimpeded flow in the prose'.[42] She aligns them to 'the "micro-blows" of maternal experience' described by Baraitser:

> The lived experience of mothering is closer to a seemingly endless series of "micro-blows"; what I am referring to as breaches, tears or puncturings to the mother's durational experiences bringing her back "again and again" into the realm of the immediate, the present, the here-and-now. (p. 68)

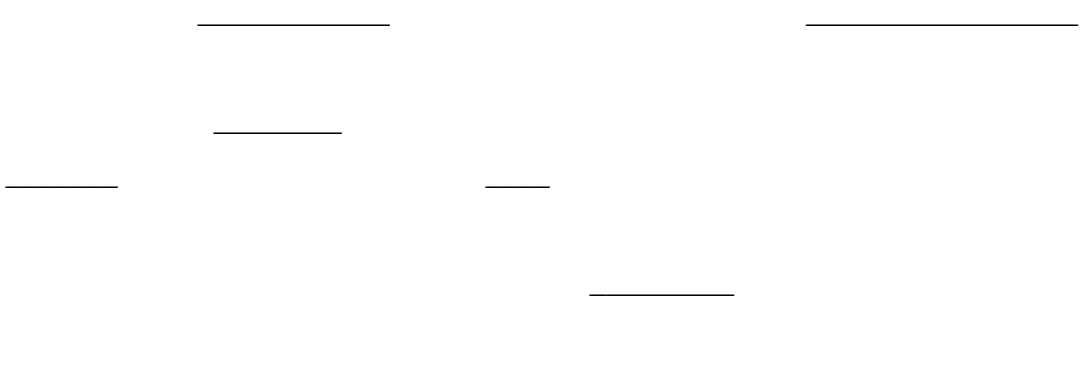
The material experience of interruption is given form in the 'breaches, tears or puncturings' that appear on the page. While it is not interruption itself that plays out in the text, Thomas's reading implies that the effect on the reader is a similar one. These gaps in the text effect interruption in the narrative, both interrupting the reader and fragmenting the construction of a cohesive narrative self through 'their episodic nature […] lack of strong causal connections' and of coherent narrative.[43] An interrupted maternal subjectivity is created on the page despite the absence of explicit interruptions.

While there is then a visible parallel on the page – the text, bitty, broken up with white space is the manifestation of the practical reality of writing in motherhood – the published version is in fact disproportionate to that reality. For in depicting motherhood as fissured by interruptions I have failed to acknowledge that these interruptions undoubtedly hold much more space and are much more prolonged than the periods of thought.

A first, over-simplified, diagram of interruption, where the black line portrays a mother's thought as a continuous thread and the gaps mark where this is broken by the child's interruptions might look something like this:

[42] Mariana Thomas, 'Contemporary Narratives of Motherhood: Temporality, Reparation and Subjectivity' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Southampton, 2019), p. 118.
[43] Di Summa-Knoop, p. 11.

Adding to this the fact that after an interruption one doesn't start off from the same point, but elsewhere, gives a further diagram:



But if interruption is indeed the ground of the maternal day-to-day, and threads of thought, or writing, are bursts that occur in between, a more appropriate diagram might look like this:

Or even this:

The original idea of a thread of thought fissured by interruption is inversed, to depict instead *thought* as the arrhythmic fissures that slide through life with children, itself a background of many prolonged interruptions.

'What could the baby lend to thought?' (Brady, p. 16) asks the lyric voice in *Mutability*. That a mother's day-to-day might inform rather than detract from 'the real work' (p. 35) is a

premise advanced in Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace.*[44] Recognising that thought is not an abstract, closed arena but rather 'arises from and is shaped by the practices in which people engage' (p. 9) and frustrated at how the realms of thought and reason are 'meant to be detached and impersonal' (p. 8), disassociated from concerns such as love and care, Ruddick turns her attention to the sorts of thinking that arise out of the practice of mothering. Recalling late-night conversations with friends once her children were in bed, she wonders: 'Could this "chattering," so unlike the philosophy in which I was trained, be "thinking"? Did I, did we, through endless telephone calls and late night coffee, create themes of a "discourse"?' (p. 11). Moreover, she asks, are there 'alternative ideals of reason that might derive from women's work and experiences, ideals more appropriate to responsibility and love?' (p. 9). Recognising and documenting the mental dexterity that goes into meeting 'those requirements that are imposed on anyone doing maternal work' […] by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training' (p. 17), her stance attributes value to these other modes of thought. Where Olsen writes that in motherhood 'it is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil', Ruddick responds by attending to these modes of being, and the thought ('the intellectual capacities [a mother] develops, the judgements she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, the values she affirms' (p. 24)) that arises through them.[45] In so doing she acknowledges the value in the practices of mothering and questions why domesticity and carework be relegated from the realm of thought. What if we write *distractedly, interruptedly*, and *spasmodically*?, she might ask in response to Olsen. By acknowledging the value in these ostensibly periphery modes of thinking, Ruddick imbues them with potential.

These versions of thinking are affirmed in instances in which mothers document how they do their work. Olsen's monologic short story 'I Stand here Ironing' begins 'I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron' and slides into a twenty-three page reverie on motherhood, rhythmed by the movement of the iron.[46] For poet and nature writer Kathleen Jamie, turning her attention to the natural world is not consecrated time, rather '[b]etween the laundry and the fetching kids from school, that's how birds enter my life. I listen. During a lull in traffic, oyster catchers. In the school playground, sparrows.'[47] Writer Maggie O'Farrell tells how the work happens when 'engaged with some other mundane task. The washing up, the folding of laundry, the school run, the debate with a small child over the merits and

[44] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 3. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
[45] Olsen, *Silences,* p. 19.
[46] Tillie Olsen, 'I Stand Here Ironing', in *Tell Me a Riddle* (London: Virago, 1980), pp. 11-23 (p. 11).
[47] Kathleen Jamie, *Findings* (London: Sort Of Books, 2005), p. 39.

demerits of wearing a coat in December.'[48] These small records proffer a version of creative work, in which thought is not segregated from the domestic but enfolded into it. And one in which the thinking happens, despite being immersed in mothering.

Another mode of considering this relation between mothering and thinking is depicted in a phone conversation between writers Kate Zambreno and Marie Darrieussecq in the *Paris Review*. The transcription of the conversation includes references to '[*Baby crying in the background*]'.[49] In this case the crying baby doesn't punctuate the text but rather 'crying' is an intermittent noise, in square brackets it is situated beside, or behind the text 'in the background'. That the baby be acknowledged recognises its relevance, even its contribution, to the thinking work that the mothers are doing in the article. 'What could the baby lend to thought?' The rhetorical question in Brady's poem is answered again and again in *Mutability* itself and in these texts. This, and this, and this! There's an assertion that needs to be made here, it echoes Ruddick's assertions, and yet I am loath to make it for lying within it is the plethora of everyday discourses as to mothering, of the order of 'motherhood rots the mind'. The statement is: mother's think. And they do so while mothering.

This thinking that mothers do, while mothering, provides a sharp commentary on an ideal of thought, of writing, that inhabits an uninterrupted plane, 'I can't occupy the poem in process of building it. I'm taking notes on what is happening somewhere else' (Brady, p. 33). Writing, as with thinking, isn't a process of 'occupying the poem', but rather it is a happening-alongside or a happening-within. This sort of thinking (gleaned alongside, outside, within the other labour, that of motherhood) engages with its object differently. It recognises a form of comprehension that is rhythmed by the specific needs and demands of a child and establishes a mode of writing that is conditioned by the relation of care. Portrayed on the page as snatches, bursts, marginal, periphery – it is not 'lesser', as Olsen claimed, but other. A praxis in which the 'making' happens through 'a general theory of kindness' (Brady p. 23).

I come to see a practice of thinking and writing that is enmeshed within the practice of motherhood. A practice in which the two projects sometimes entwine, or merge, 'I can't tell if they're / me or not'.[50] This parallel is, I notice, mirrored in the genre of the writing itself. When exploring almost unilaterally mothers writing about motherhood, there is an overlap between the subject matter and the material experience. Maternal writing lies on a juncture between two

[48] Maggie O'Farrell, 'My Writing Day: Maggie O'Farrell', *Guardian*, 17 December 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/17/my-writing-day-maggie-o-farrell> [accessed 25 February 2022]
[49] Marie Darrieussecq and Kate Zambreno, 'Reappearing Women: A Conversation Between Marie Darrieussecq and Kate Zambreno', *Paris Review*, 23 October 2017 <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/10/23/reappearing-women-a-conversation-between-marie-darrieussecq-and-kate-zambreno/> [accessed 25 February 2022]
[50] Notley, 'January' <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/notley/january.html> [accessed 25 February 2022]

different areas of writing that are often placed in opposition: first, writing as praxis, a writing that is shaped by circumstance and experience not designed to illustrate the personal, 'but through which the personal takes place' (Baraitser, p. 14) and second, writing as testimony, a more deliberate, dedicated illustrating of the experience of motherhood. Circumstance is both happening upon the mother's writing and being named within it. The latter is mapped onto the former to give a double representation of motherhood, in both form and content. An overlap that is not so much tautological but coincidental, synchronous.

A study of interruption reveals certain distinctive features common to maternal writing, which come under a maternal poetics. At the most extreme it alights on broken sentences, distorted grammar and tense, and slippage in meaning, caused by the physical presence of the child within the writing space. Echoes between a mother's and a child's voice also become evident and this language-making that happens between mother and child creates material for the writing itself. At a lesser extreme it exposes a tendency to shortness and to frequent gaps and episodic texts, which destabilise notions of a coherent narrative self. This extends beyond the page to give insight into the material experience of mothering, illustrating certain elements of maternal subjectivity, in particular a fragmented, dislodged and unaccommodated experience of selfhood. Interruption also divulges something of the practices of writing and of thinking while mothering, and of the material experiences of making within carework. It reveals the artifice at work in abstracting the practice of making and the body of the maker from that which is made, and in so doing it poses a question as to conjectures about the way art can, or indeed *should*, be made. Interruption can be read as an invitation to experiment with form: if I am interrupted so be it, if my thought, my day to day, my sleep is persistently under attack, so shall I write.

It's like this: I'm working, I'm writing, the door is… the door is ajar, I'm writing the thing, what am I writing? This, say, I'm writing this, a chapter of my PhD, I'm in the writing, and there's this shout *Mum!,* my daughter enters. I turn on my daughter: *Can't you see! / I've told you already! /That's enough!!* But her interruption offers me a choice: I turn *on* my daughter or I turn *to* my daughter. Her interruption is a call to engage with the writing otherwise.

The shadow cast by interruption lifts. It redefines itself as a renewing experience, one rife with potential, promising to open up even redefine writers' practice. And yet, by taking interruption and shaking it of all its negative qualities, in exacerbating the possibility and potential it offers, I risk undermining the very antagonism it can represent, specifically that mental, emotional, even physical bruising a mother might undergo. A study of interruption must also acknowledge the terribly real frustration, resentment, anger, anguish, guilt and sorrow that it might provoke in a mother and writer. Interruption transforms, enables, but concurrently, or prior to

that, it unbalances, disables. To reclaim interruption is not to enact a strict transvaluation, to wave a wand and make good of the bad, but to hold in place both these elements, to suggest that interruption might give while it also limits. To put hope in that place where, so often, there is none, to highlight possibility where none is apparent.

> I am angry – this is harder to say – at my daughter for always interrupting me. Generation after generation it is the same story. My daughter says to me one night, "You don't like me because I always bother you." I carry this around with me, these words, a sorrow so deep to express it would be to fly apart.[51]

CODA

I gave a shorter version of this chapter as a paper at a conference in 2018. A question that I was asked afterwards by an audience member remains with me. I would like to address it here. She referred to the fact that interruption isn't, as it appears in here, uniquely a maternal prerogative, but is all-pervasive. What quality therefore was specific to maternal interruption?, she asked. At the time I fumbled, but the answer seemed to lie in *who it was* that enacted the interruption, a child. I think I mentioned the term 'ethics'. I've wondered about it since. What is it to be interrupted by a child, by one's own child? Is this really, or merely, an annoyance, an irritation? How does it differ from other types of interruption, by the postman, say, or the phone ringing? I have come to see that the implications, and perhaps ethics is the right word, of a child's interruption are distinct, for they are embedded in a relationship of care.

In fact, I have come to think that a child's interruption is not really of the order of interruption at all, rather it is of the order of relating and communicating, for it is through this interruption that a dependent child makes a mother, its primary carer, aware of its needs. Understanding that interruption is a mode of communication, or a mode of relation, is what makes it so devastatingly and excruciatingly singular to the maternal experience: it seems to me now that the acute poignancy of a child's interruption is that it should not be called 'interruption' at all.

[51] Susan Griffin, 'Feminism and Motherhood', in *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, ed. by Moyra Davey (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), pp. 33-45 (p. 33).

E F F A C E M E N T

To begin with an incident outside
language, beyond recollection,
enforces the solidarity of our work
to build up into sound. Pethedine concussions
and a nozzle of oxygen to plead across
running like a horse, spare us
the knowledge that there is no knowledge
come rushing down, feral.
Effacing into perfect silence,
the working tongue in a yellow corridor. (Brady, p. 3)

Turning again to this first poem in *Mutability* offers me a further reading, for in looking once more a series of absences that underpin the text becomes apparent. My initial take superimposed an infant's cry onto the poem and sought to establish therein an antagonism between the work of mother and that of poet, one that was crystallised in the noisy instant of interruption. On attending to the text now it is not this antagonism that comes to the fore, but what is omitted.

The poem 'begin[s] with an incident', but is never explicit as to what the incident is. Words gather, collect around it, try perhaps to recollect, but it remains 'outside', 'beyond'. It's on the move, 'running' or 'rushing down'. I am disappointed. This feels like a trick, a false start. I know the incident is there for it has been named. Something has happened, 'an incident', but the event itself falls through the holes of the textual net. The incident is absent. It is indicated, gestured towards, but fails to appear.

I do in fact know what the incident is. I know because of the medical terminology that sits alongside it. 'Pethedine' and 'nozzle of oxygen' are adjuncts, incidental, but they tell me enough. The 'concussions' come in to conjure contractions. And, is it the cervix that is '[e]ffacing'? Moreover, I am familiar with the 'yellow corridor' for it makes another appearance in *Mutability*, and then with the addition of a midwife, 'Later, the midwife puts me in a wheelchair and pedals us out into a yellow corridor' (p. 85). The poem is situated on the labour ward. And, the incident is birth, is giving birth.

I want to situate this absent incident in a body. But, stranger still, the body too is absent. Machines, drugs, in the place of limbs, do the remembering. Wait. There: a 'working tongue'.

Tongue still functioning then? No. Tongue '[e]ffac[ed] into perfect silence'. I wonder at this. I wonder at the poet writing this most bodily of experiences without situating it in a body, without giving it a subject. Perhaps it is the effect of the drugs, the concussions of Pethedine. Body concussed, tongue silenced. I have spotted 'a horse', it is likely 'feral'. But even this horse, 'running', evades me. Has the body-subject become horse? Gone feral?

The omissions become layered: things are gestured towards but as quickly vanish, nothing holds. The poem tentatively puts words ('sound') to these absences ('silence'), but is most conspicuous in what it 'spare[s] us'. The incident and the body, both are absent; there is 'no knowledge'; language and memory fail; leaving at the poem's close only 'perfect silence' in a 'yellow corridor'. The abstract mode used to write about the corporeal experience of giving birth appears to be hinged here on labour and birth's incompatibility with language: the incident falls explicitly 'outside' of language and 'beyond recollection'. The racing heights of labour plummet into silence.

What is being articulated in the poem seems, in the same instant, to resist articulation. The capitalised 'Effacing' at the start of the final sentence offers a means of reading into this effect, for 'efface' denotes that which is erased, that which is absent. The term here is synecdochic: it signifies beyond itself to represent and encompass the poem as a whole. In its primary meaning 'efface' refers to the physical removal of something written or inscribed, be it the face of a coin or the text of a manuscript. It is this sense that becomes apparent in the poem, a sense that the words have been erased and that in their place the poem holds only their absence.

However 'Effacing' extends beyond this reading to offer further interpretations: there is a suggestion that the instant of giving birth and becoming a mother (that 'incident') is not one of coming into being so much as one of *effacing,* both self and language. Reading this poem initially through a lens of interruption was suggestive in a small way of an infant's silencing of a mother. A further reading is suggestive of a wider silencing. This effacement at the very instant of giving birth and becoming a mother not only nods towards the widely testified to 'loss of self' that occurs on becoming a mother but moves beyond the individual to motion to other stories of maternal effacement, to the sorts of political, cultural, social and historical erasure that mothers have undergone. In this chapter I dwell on this term, effacement, and its resonances in individual experiences of motherhood, using it as a means of reading maternal writing, in order to continue putting together a poetics of motherhood.

Efface is a particularly evocative term. It expands beyond its first use referring to writing, to enter metaphor, where it speaks of deletion, erasure, of obliteration. It also has a specific medical usage, where it is directly related to birth labour: effacement refers to the thinning and stretching of the cervix that enables the vaginal delivery of a baby. These various contexts, straddling the

concrete and the abstract, make it a valuable tool in reading maternal writing. They offer a means of grounding the concept of effacement in both the text and in the body.

It is the proximity between physiological and psychical experiences within the context of maternity that first draws my attention. Or, *Had I known*…, I, mother, might say, might cry out, *Had I known that this first, cervical, effacement foreshadowed another*… For the biological mechanism is less elaborate than the loss of identifiable self that it heralds.

I'm making a leap, of course, resting on a coincidence of terms, but one testified to in account after account of mothers' post-partum experiences. For, while cervical effacement might only feature minutely, if at all, in a mother's experience, the effacement of the self is extensively chronicled. This loss of self begins in mothers' accounts of pregnancy: 'My face looked alien to me. My character blurred. […] I was not myself. […] for nine watchful, quiet months. […] Then it was born.'[52] This nine-month period during which the physical and related changes are described variously as a profound altering of 'one's "normal" state', 'an extinguishing of an earlier self', and 'myself in the mode of not being myself', forms a preface to an experience which is compounded in accounts of motherhood, where descriptions of 'psychic crisis', 'loss of autonomy' and 'the altered […] nature of identity' sit alongside terms such as 'obliterat[ion]', 'oblivion' and 'death'.[53]

This widely recounted effacement of the self, traced here through a series of near-synonyms, remains an unexpected, unprepared-for (or unpreparable-for) event that characterises both pregnancy and motherhood. It is an effacement of the self which is not to be interpreted as self-effacement, not the deliberate rendering of one's self 'inconspicuous', but a dramatic severing of one's self from one's self.[54]

The identity 'mother' appears to erase the previous self, as Rachel Cusk's study of motherhood, *A Life's Work*, depicts:

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[52] Elizabeth Mann Borgese, *The Ascent of Woman* (New York: MacGibbon & Key, 1963), p. 44.

[53] Nelson, p. 13; Rich, p. 167; Iris Marion Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', in *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 46-62 (p. 49); Rich, p. 36; Rebecca Asher, *Shattered: Modern Motherhood and the Illusion of Equality* (London: Harvill Secker, 2011), pp. 2-3; Suzanne Juhasz, *A Desire for Women: Relational Psychoanalysis, Writing, and Relationships Between Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 96; Alice Notley, 'A Baby is Born out of a White Owl's Forehead – 1972', in *Mysteries of Small Houses: Poems* (London: Penguin, 1998) p. 38 and Polly Clark, 'Giving Birth: The Everyday Trauma', *Guardian*, 25 March 2017, Review section, p. 3 [accessed 27 June 2022]; Lynda Schor 'My Death', in *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, ed. by Moyra Davey (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), pp. 301-310 (p. 302) and Rich, p. 29.

[54] 'Self-effacement', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online] <https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/175219?redirectedFrom=self-effacement#eid> [accessed 18 March 2022]

> The break between mother and self was less clean than I had imagined it in the taxi: and yet it was a premonition, too; for later, even in my best moments, I never feel myself to have progressed beyond this division.[55]

For Cusk, there is a palpable sense of division: the 'self' of before has been replaced by the 'mother' of now. The position is a fixed one, there is no means of moving on from it, as such it has a static quality. This sense of stasis is palpable in many of the testimonies: the experience of effacement is a permanent one.

'[S]tanding in front of the mirror striving to recognise [her]self' (p. 65) Cusk's loss of identity culminates in a loss of recognition. It is as if her identity, her lost self, could be sought in the mirror, and be recovered through a veracious reflection. But this is refused her, instead she remains unrecognisable to herself, needing to 'glu[e] parts of my face back on and [say] things in front of the mirror' (p. 79). She notes that 'I began to speak with a curious lisp, and would put a hand to my mouth several times a day to check that my tongue was not lolling out of it' (p. 178). The 'face' is the expression of this loss tying her experience back to this term 'effacement'. Efface comes into English via the French 'effacer', from the Latin, '*ex*-' out + '*facie*' face.[56] Its strict meaning is one of removing the face, where it coincides with its more unfavourable sibling deface. Just as the earlier mother, who writes of her face looking 'alien' to her in pregnancy, so Cusk's inability to recognise herself suggests that these mothers have been literally effaced (and possibly defaced): their faces have been wiped of familiar marks and becoming mothers has made them unrecognisable to themselves.

But of what order is this 'self' that has been effaced? The notion that there exists a cohesive and continuous 'self', one that could in turn be lost, is necessarily problematic. Or, to use the words of psychologist Suzanne Juhasz, 'Whether there is indeed such a thing as a "subject" or a "self" is endlessly argued by theorists of all persuasions. Many say that all sense of continuity or coherence is an illusion.'[57] However, much maternal testimony and theory is dependent on this concept of a 'self', on a coherent sense of selfhood, one that is troubled by the advent of motherhood. Baraitser, for example, describes 'a fundamental transformation of state; from something solid, unified, singular to something messy, interdependent and altogether more blurred' (pp. 49-50). '[S]olid, unified, singular', the 'self' is depicted as an object, which in the transition to 'mother' has been lost.

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[55] Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 57. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
[56] 'Efface', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online] <https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/59650?redirectedFrom=efface#eid> [accessed 18 March 2022]
[57] Juhasz, p. 96.

This sets up a temporal dimension: what was before is no longer. 'I was not in the world as I knew it previously', one mother recounts of her existence after the birth of her daughter.[58] This backward-turned gaze is one of yearning, qualified by mournfulness or melancholy, it is suggestive of a pre-infant state in which a 'self' existed, one that has been obliterated by the arrival of the infant. As with interruption, which established a mother's continuity in the very act of breaking it, so there is a sense here that it is the very destabilising of identity that incurs knowledge of a prior identity. In other words, this firm sense of a self as 'something solid, unified, singular' is in part dependent on its loss, or effacement.

Cusk continues to deliberate on this crisis of selfhood in her book that succeeds *A Life's Work*, *Aftermath,* where she writes, 'To act as a mother, I had to suspend my own character'.[59] The character 'mother' supersedes that of a 'self'. Hers is an uncomfortable position, one that echoes that denoted in Rich's *Of Woman Born*, 'Nothing could have prepared me for the realization that I was a mother, one of those givens […] That calm, sure, unambivalent woman who moved through the pages of the manuals I read seemed as unlike me as an astronaut' (p. 36). 'Character', writes Cusk 'is entirely and utterly specific' (p. 18), whereas the identity mother is 'generic'. She thereby highlights a disassociation between the acute specificity of the self and the generic quality of the mother.

> I was aware in those early days that my behaviour was strange to those who knew me well. It was as though I had been brainwashed, taken over by a cult religion. I had gone away – I couldn't be reached on the usual number. And yet this cult, motherhood, was not a place where I could actually live. It reflected nothing of me: its literature and practices, its values, its codes of conduct, its aesthetic were not mine. It was generic too: like any cult, it demanded a complete surrender of identity to belong to it. (pp. 18-19)

This generic, group identity does not reflect anything of her (singular) self. Looking again for affirmation in reflection, not in the mirror on this occasion, but metaphorically, in the objects and actions of this group identity, she finds that these fail to reflect her back. Pragmatically, the identity offered up to her as a mother doesn't concur with her own understanding of her self.

Cusk's explanation is but one of numerous causes of this recurrent sensation of effacement. 'Loss of self' might variously refer to the defamiliarisation from a known self; a loss of social recognition; the incompatibility of the new identity 'mother' with the known world; and/or the

[58] Clark, p. 3.
[59] Cusk, *Aftermath* (London: Faber, 2012), p. 18. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

incompatibility of the generic social construct 'Mother' with an individual's specific sense of identity. Defamiliarisation occurs as many of the 'lived way[s]', those habits and actions, which a woman has for recognising, 'understanding and experiencing' (being familiar to) her self are replaced by an arsenal of unfamiliar tasks and actions.[60] When this is exacerbated by the physiological, hormonal and psychological complexity of early motherhood, a mother finds that her occupations, her physicality and her emotions, all are strange to her: she is no longer familiar to herself. Furthermore, by placing her in an arena of subservience and domesticity, her transition to motherhood incurs a shift in outside perception, she finds she is 'not properly recognized as [a subject] by other individuals around [her]'.[61] This loss of social recognition is furthered by the inability of the outside world, the working environment, the non-domestic and public spaces etc. to facilitate mothering and accommodate mothers, 'social spaces, work practices and gender norms [being] premised on their exclusion.'[62] Moreover, the social construct 'Mother' is resistant to any sense of individual identity, a 'Mother' is a background, an 'all' (Cusk, *Life's Work*, p. 70) or, say, the 'nourishing soil of her child's subjectivity-to-be'.[63] Indeed, 'the social construction of motherhood as an idealized selflessness' means that 'the very possibility of subjectivity becomes problematic'.[64] It is on this terrain, where a woman is 'in serious ways no longer "who" she was before' and simultaneously unable to forge an identity within that offered that effacement is sited.[65]

Alison Stone describes coming into motherhood as '[a fall] into a formless realm that excludes meaning and agency'.[66] Stone's description offers a further reading of that 'incident', from the Latin, '*in-*' + '*cadere*', to fall into, in *Mutability*.[67] Perhaps the 'incident' referred to in the poem is less explicitly that of giving birth and more suggestively that of becoming a mother, that same fall 'into a formless realm that excludes meaning and agency'. In line with my study of interruption, I would like to propose that this formless realm, this space of effacement, that a mother falls into, can be generative. Moreover, through attending to depictions of effacement, metaphorical as biological, I propose that alternative, and more fitting modes and models of maternal subjectivity can begin to be configured.

Alice Notley's 'A Baby is Born out of a White Owl's Forehead' gives a further exposition of a mother's struggle with her loss of self. The poem explores 'the disjunctions between subjective

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[60] Alison Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 3.
[61] Stone, p. 2.
[62] Petra Bueskens, 'Maternal Subjectivity: From Containing to Creating' in *Dangerous Ideas About Mothers*, ed. by R. Robertson and C. Nelson (Crawley: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2018), pp. 197-211 (p. 208).
[63] Stone, p. 2.
[64] Juhasz, pp. 97, 96.
[65] Juhasz, p. 90.
[66] Stone, p. 2.
[67] 'Incident', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online] <https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/93465#eid783831> [accessed 18 March 2022]

experience and the dominant discourses of motherhood'.[68] It does so by setting up a tension between imposed maternal identity in the first stanza, 'I want to shriek at / any identity / this culture gives me claw it to / pieces; has nothing to / do with me or / my baby and never will', and effacement of self in the fourth, 'he is born and I am undone – feel as if I will / never be, was never born'.[69] Echoing Ann Oakley's statement 'I was delivered of my identity at the same time [as my baby]', and reiterating Baraitser's that the mother 'budges up to make room for another' (p. 49) here the birth of her son dislodges the mother's identity.[70] Her prior existence, her 'I', is erased by his birth and the social construct 'Mother', the identity offered in place of her own, is found to be incompatible, 'nothing to do with' either her or her baby. As such, the mother in the poem is devoid of self. It is with an expression of this effacement that the poem concludes: 'for two years / there's no me here' (p. 39).

A first reading of this poem reaffirms the maternal experience I have been considering: similar to Cusk's narrator, Notley's mother finds herself in a position in which the identity she is offered does not reflect her own selfhood, leaving her without a self. The subject is effaced: 'there's no me here'. However, these expressions of effacement merit staying with. For, within these many declarations of absent, lost or erased selves, what becomes more palpable is rather their expressions of selfhood, albeit one that is not. The self is not in fact erased, but made visible on the page and given expression in the lyric voice.

'[T]here's no me here', Notley's mother claims. But there is a 'me' here, as the statement acknowledges. Is the claim then an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms? In naming their *absence* of self, mothers are divulging something, both in the content, and in the grammar, of its *presence.* The reiterated figure of the first person pronoun, the 'me', the 'I' (not quite lost then?), undermines the original premise, complicating this narrative of loss of self. For within this 'me', this 'I' is the acknowledgement of a 'self', a speaking, desiring social subject.

In fact, this admittedly thin slip of self glimpsed at the point of loss of self divulges an interesting ambivalence in the act of declaring one's self effaced. It opens up a divergent means of reading into effacement. For effacement is a strange sort of signifier: in naming what is not apparent, it gives substance to absence, eliciting an ambivalence in its very name. To speak of effacement is to speak of something that is not, or more explicitly, something that is no more. This is evident in Brady's poem, preoccupied with what was but is no longer, with that which cannot be articulated except through absences, and negative terminology, the incident that is no more. The

[68] Clare Hanson, 'The Book of Repetition: Rachel Cusk and Maternal Subjectivity', *Révue Electronique d'Etudes sur le Monde Anglophone*, 10, 2 (2013) <https://journals.openedition.org/erea/3259> [accessed 27 June 2022] (para. 1)
[69] Notley, 'A Baby is Born Out of a White Owl's Forehead – 1972', in *Mysteries of Small Houses* (New York: Penguin, 1998), pp. 38, 39. Further references to this poem are given after quotations in the text.
[70] Ann Oakley quoted in Stone, p. 2.

primary meaning of effacement as erasure of text or inscription is relevant here: there is a sense that while it has been erased, there is a presence still, a trace of what was a moment before, delineated through its negative expression. Language is used to denote what is not apparent, to invoke an absent object. In terms of a mother's self, the 'I' is superimposed on the absence, like a palimpsest, it's a text written over a previously erased text.

This apophatic tendency takes on a further manifestation in Lynda Schor's 1975 short story, 'My Death'. The story enumerates the tasks of a mother's domestic quotidian. These begin with the mother debating whether to take her baby or her groceries up the two flights of stairs to her flat first, and eventually deciding not to risk leaving either of them:

> With the baby in my arms, I bent down, took out his blanket, bottle, and his toys, put them alongside him in one arm; then with the other hand I lifted the huge bag of groceries out by the top of the bag – balancing it gently so the whole top didn't tear off – and settled it in my other arm.[71]

However, 'at the bottom of the second flight of stairs, something happened' (p. 301). 'This is it', the mother thinks, 'What I was always afraid of. Death.' (p. 301). Despite knowing she's dead, the mother doesn't 'want to drop the baby' (p. 302) or the groceries, so she makes 'a supreme effort' (p. 302) and continues up the second flight of stairs to her flat. So her day continues, the baby 'unaware of her condition' (p. 302) feeds from her breast, and unable to persuade her friends 'Listen', 'I'm dead' (p. 303) to pick up her other children from school, she has to do so. When her son cuts his lip open, she has to take him to A&E. Her breast eventually stops giving milk, her husband calls her a hypochondriac, and only eventually when everyone is fed and asleep can she actually lie down and die. It's a humorous take, a feminist skit: a mother has to keep performing her maternal tasks, no one's going to help out, nor heed her when she announces she can't keep going, she can't even die. But the experience of being dead isn't a strange one to the mother, 'It actually felt familiar' (p. 302). In fact, the story implies that life when dead – as per the construct of the story – isn't any different to life being alive, for motherhood itself is oblivion or death. The story ends with the mother eventually being able to let go to her death, drowning in the bath tub.

> I rested my back against the curved back of the tub and slowly slid downward. I continued sliding down until I felt the water crawling up over my lips, feeling the water in my nose,

[71] Lynda Schor, 'My Death' in *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, ed. by Moyra Davey (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), pp. 301-310 (p. 301). Further references to this story are given after quotations in the text.

> over my eyes, and tickling my scalp as it flooded fluidly through my hair. I never bothered to come up. I noticed the oblivion I was experiencing was not that much different from the usual. (p. 310)

This story is an analogy for those testimonies of maternal subjectivity in which a mother's self has been effaced. Similar to Cusk, effacement here is deface-ment: this mother too turns to the mirror, but for confirmation of her effacement. 'I didn't look good […] I looked white and solid, as if I was made of marble, an article rather than a person. In a lifeless state, my face was really ugly' (p. 302). And again, towards the end of the story, 'My face was already thinner; my eyes looked like melted fish eyes. My skin was like cheese cake with birthday-candle blue lips' (p. 310). She is not only disfigured in her own eyes but in those of others, repeatedly receiving comments 'you look so terrible' (p. 306); 'you look so bad' (p. 307); 'you don't look well' (pp. 307, 309). Effacement isn't limited to her own perception of her self but affirmed by outsiders' points of view. Nor does her effacement just occur at the face, but through a series of bodily sensations, a feeling of 'incomparable nausea' (p. 301), or dizziness, a stopped heart and rigor mortis (pp. 302, 304). The experience of effacement is a material, embodied one.

The mother asserts 'I'm dead' on numerous occasions. No one, of course, takes her seriously, it's a metaphor, her friend responds 'I'm worse than dead' (p. 303), her husband, 'You always complain' (p. 304), others think she's mad (pp. 306, 307). However, this expression is a pertinent one to a study of effacement, for it attests once more to the layering of a present self over an absent self. Here 'there's no me here' is replaced by the simple declaration 'I'm dead'. The rhetorical approach is the same. Grammatically, these expressions invoke the ungainly statement that Juhasz uses to express this experience of depletion of self, 'I am no longer "I"'.[72] And they are grammatically interesting for they derail the first-person pronouns 'I' and 'me', allowing them to refer to a state not of presence but of absence. The pronoun is palimpsestic, it is overlaid on an effacement. What this stance portrays then is a subject witness to her own effacement, suggestive not so much of an effaced self, but of a self structured by its effacement, where self and effacement both, are present. The 'I' in these first-person testimonies is a placeholder for a self that is both absent and present, a present-absent self. This is profoundly suggestive of maternal subjectivity, it offers a more nuanced interpretation of 'loss of self', one that can be further developed through considering the 'both' of absence and presence.

This 'both' is iterated in Notley's poem: 'Of two poems one sentimental and one not / I choose both / of his birth and my painful unbirth I choose both.' *I choose both.* The both of birth

[72] Juhasz, p. 94.

and unbirth, the both of absent and present self. Through *choosing* both, the poem imbues the ambivalence of effacement with agency, it is not something to be passively suffered, but something to elect. It thereby counters the static position seen in previous testimonies and by injecting effacement with potential disavows the melancholy attached to it. Notley's statement 'I choose both' offers an exciting means of invigorating and reclaiming effacement, proposing that it might be a generative experience. For Notley's mother doesn't mourn her loss but dwells within it, and by choosing it stages a reclamation. I might revise Stone's version therefore, to propose instead that these mothers have fallen into a formless realm that *exudes* meaning and agency.

A similar attitude is inhabited by the mother-narrator in Joanna Walsh's short story, 'Drowning' from her collection *Vertigo*. 'Shall I tell you what it is like to drown?', she asks, 'It is very calm and quiet'.[73] The figure of the mother calmly testifying to her own drowning (as in: it is calmer and quieter to drown than to mother?), recalls the ending of 'My Death'. In both stories drowning can be read as an analogy for maternal effacement. But Walsh's story animates the instant of effacement. By inserting the conjunction 'if' at the point of drowning, it offers the mother a possible out:

> The best thing is to keep on moving arms and legs, and watch the waves, almost as though moving forward. In this way despair turns to happiness, and back to despair again. And, *if* you reach the beach, walk across it like everything is fine, toward your family who would not like to see the abyss you have just swum over. (p. 123, emphasis added)

With this 'if', the narrator likewise disrupts the melancholic position and announces a possibility of transgressing the abyss of effacement and emerging on the far side. Effaced, near drowned, I might clamber out the far side and go on being. Or, so it appears.

In fact, the end is irresolute. The possibility of transgressing is glimpsed, but it is only a glimpse. Instead, the story rests upon the 'if'. Near-drowning, near-happily-ever-after, not sure. Unlike 'My Death', where 'I never bothered to come up', 'Drowning' does not end, but suspends space and suspends time, suspends a body in the sea. A body, 'moving arms and legs', a self turning back and forth between 'despair' and 'happiness'. Hanging there, not quite drowning, not quite emerging. The decision is not made, it hangs in the balance. The passivity of Schor's effacement ('I never bothered') is here countered by the mother's affirmation of agency earlier in the story: 'I walk back to the beach and walk in to the sea. It is my choice' (p. 119). To dwell in the bothness

[73] Joanna Walsh, 'Drowning', in *Vertigo* (High Wycombe: And Other Stories, 2016), pp. 113-123 (p. 119). Further references to this story are given after quotations in the text.

of effacement is again affirmed as a choice; to drown or not, to despair or not, *I choose both*. Walsh's story, like Notley's poem, doesn't choose one position over the other, but holds both in place, simultaneously. Theirs is not a static position like that portrayed by Cusk, for to choose both is to call into question this fixedness and to acknowledge one's agency in doing so. This is iterated too by the figure of the writer-mother in *Mutability* who is 'not closing, […] but continuing to open like a fountain. This is my justification. For a writing of honest particularity, not clean, in a form which would catch rather than cauterize this pouring' (p. 6). Not to close, nor to cauterize, but to catch this experience of effacement – such is the project.

What then can the ambivalent quality of effacement add to an understanding of maternal subjectivity? Ambivalence is a thematic in Jane Lazarre's novel *The Mother Knot*, where it is encapsulated in the phrase, '[w]e learned always to expect sentences to have two parts, the second seeming to contradict the first, the unity lying only in our growing ability to tolerate ambivalence – for that is what motherly love is like'.[74] These two-part sentences pour out of the mouths of the narrator and her friend Anna, covering most of a page. 'I love them and everything, but I hate them', 'I would die for him […] but he has destroyed my life and I live only to find a way of getting it back again', 'I can't wait until tomorrow, when it is your day to keep the children […] but I dread leaving them in the morning' (p. 85). The ability to express this bothness in their feelings towards their children cements their friendship and becomes a crucial element of the *truth* of their experiences as mothers, 'without the second part of the sentence, the first part was a treacherous lie – a lie we had sworn to be done with' (p. 85). The *I choose both* of effacement is echoed in the I choose both of maternal ambivalence expressed here.

Ambivalence is a position in which two opposing values are inhabited at once. It seems an appropriate term to describe these expressions of effacement in which a self is both present and absent at once. Moreover, this ambivalent quality establishes a tie with the theorising of maternal subjectivity. Considered to be one of the primary experiences of the maternal subject, ambivalence is the focus of Rozsika Parker's study, *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*, where it is defined as 'the concept developed by psychoanalysis according to which quite contradictory impulses and emotions towards the same person co-exist. The positive and negative components sit side by side and remain in opposition'.[75] Ambivalence was originally theorised by Sigmund Freud, but it was Melanie Klein who placed it at the heart of the mother-child relationship. However, Klein's theory focuses primarily on that ambivalence experienced by *the child* towards the mother. It is perhaps therefore D. W. Winnicott's famous exploration of ambivalence or

[74] Jane Lazarre, *The Mother Knot* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 85. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.
[75] Rozsika Parker, *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (London: Virago, 1995), pp. 5-6.

'ambivalency' in 'Hate in the Counter-Transference' that is the psychoanalytical text most attentive to *a mother's* experience of ambivalence. The essay includes a list, from A.-R., of 'the reasons why a mother hates her baby'. 'E. The baby is an interference with her private life, a challenge to preoccupation.', 'H. He is ruthless, treats her as scum, an unpaid servant, a slave.' And yet 'I. She has to love him, excretions and all.'[76] Herein lies the simultaneity of love and hate a mother feels: a child poses a psychic threat to a mother's experiences and existence, 'he has destroyed my life', 'there's no me here', 'I'm dead', and yet a mother must love her child wholly.

This ambivalent quality of maternal effacement becomes all the more pertinent when drawing into consideration the effacement of the cervix. Much of the terminology of pregnancy, labour and motherhood is ripe for metaphorical interpretation: rupture, transition, show, quickening, each term could be employed analogically. But inverting the metaphor and implicating it in the physical space of the body recalls the analogy to its concrete manifestation. Anchoring a mother's experience of effacement of the self in cervical effacement recognises this loss as an embodied event, in so doing it imbues the experience of effacement with a physicality, suggesting that the loss is a material one, not simply a psychical one. Moreover, it offers an alternate means of reading effacement. The effacement of the cervix during the process of labour sheds light on the ambivalence the term holds, and it likewise calls into question the earlier definition, where effacement was qualified by stasis and melancholy.

In Nelson's *The Argonauts* the ambi-valent role of the cervix is considered: 'The task of the cervix is to stay closed, to make an impenetrable wall protecting the fetus, for approximately forty weeks of a pregnancy. After that, by means of labor, the wall must somehow become an opening' (p. 124). The cervix has a dual task: it must be both wall *and* opening, two opposing stances are held within the one.

In vaginal delivery, to allow for the successful passage of foetus from womb through birth canal into outside existence, passage or process through which foetus becomes infant, and pregnant woman, mother, the cervix must both efface and dilate, thin and widen, until it disappears altogether. When the cervix is fully effaced it is no longer apparent. It appears to be absent. In fact the cervix is still there (where could it have gone?), but it has so successfully effaced itself that it is not discernible. Cervical effacement holds within it the very same ambivalence perceived in the loss of self: 100% effaced, it is however still present.

The cervix thins to vanish for the length of the second and third stages of labour (birthing the baby and placenta). For this period it is effaced, or, like Walsh's narrator, suspended in the

[76] D. W. Winnicott, 'Hate in the Counter-Transference', *Journal of Psychotherapy Practice and Research*, 3 (1994), 348-356, (p. 355).

instant of effacement. It then reverses the process to thicken and narrow, to close again. Opening becomes wall. In interpreting effacement as a nominal term I failed to recognise the '–ment', the movement within it. But, to 'open', to 'thin', the synonyms get at the processual aspect of effacement. And endowing it thus with mobility recognises its potential to be active and agential. This is upheld by Rozsika Parker's study of ambivalence. It 'is not a static state', she writes, not a condition, 'but a dynamic experience' (p. 6), one that is rife with the 'passionate mobility of feelings' (p. 5) differentiating it explicitly from the often misconstrued understanding as '*mixed* feelings' (p. 5). The ambivalent quality of effacement sets up a dynamic tension between two opposing poles, thereby invigorating it.

Despite its appellation, the labour of birthing tends to likewise be envisaged as a passive state of being, as being acted upon as opposed to acting. At an extreme a woman, prostrate, might act under a Doctor's command of 'Push!'. It is harder still to envisage cervical effacement as an active process within which a woman might have some agency. I would like to suspend these interpretations, to instead recognise labour and effacement both as acts of purpose. As a condition, effacement obliges passivity, but revivified so, it becomes agential, a means rather than an end.

Through attending to cervical effacement I can establish that effacement is embodied, ambivalent, dynamic and purposive. A wider definition thus becomes available, where effacement is a working contradiction, encompassing the boths of stasis and agency, absence and presence of self, where it might be passive as active. To best consider effacement therefore is not to fixate on one or other position, but to allow both to sit alongside.

In Claire Jarvis's essay 'No One Thinks of Rilke in the Recovery Room', which is in part a response to *Mutability*, the writer suggests that it is the act of labour itself that incurs a sensation of loss of self. '[T]he work of laboring is such', she writes 'that the versions of yourself you held dear until labor begin to dissolve'. The reason for this is, she relates, that one's self 'is constituted by the intellect, the interior, by one's thoughts', '[b]ut birth and early parenting resist thought', one is instead 'absorbed by the biology of childbirth'. Furthermore, she states, 'Motherhood pulls one outside of oneself, into a state of being that is more body that personality, more body than person.'[77] While her essay poses a challenge to a passage in *Mutability*, in which the narrator remembers a line of Rilke while 'in the cheerful squalor of the postnatal ward' (p. 6), a depiction of the infant crowning later on in Brady's book seems to align with Jarvis's vision:

[77] Claire Jarvis, 'No One Thinks of Rilke in the Recovery Room', *n+1*, July 6 2017, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/no-one-thinks-of-rilke-in-the-recovery-room/> [accessed 14 March 2022]

> Of course the pain of childbirth. That effort to expel the giant mass of another living creature, how could it be anything else than riveting, literally, nailing the body into a fine point of all tension and feeling glutted on your crown. (p. 75)

Crowning, when the crown of the infant's head appears at the vaginal opening, before passing through the perineum, occurs at 100% effacement. Here the mother is entirely 'body', not 'person', nor 'personality', suspended ('nailed') in time and space, absorbed ('riveted') by the biology of childbirth. To quote Jarvis again, 'Thinking is not the thing that is done in this state.'[78] Both the self and the cervix are effaced, the body is glutted on the infant's crown. The work of labour does indeed seem to efface all versions of selfhood. Yes effacement is here a fullness, a 'feeling glutted'. By establishing a fullness within the emptiness the poem proffers a positive value to the absence. *I choose both.* Suspended there, effaced, glutted, flicking between despair and happiness, in these texts the maternal subject is privy to her own effacement.

And, 'Of course the pain of childbirth' (Brady, p. 75). With this I notice how my portrayal of effacement so far has been clean, sterile and painless, freed of the bloody membranes, the fluids that accompany it. 'Not clean' (p. 6). No. 'No one is truly quiet giving birth.'[79] The cervix, to furnish the word with its fleshy realness, is a 'pink ring of tissue', effacement 'the transformation of the cervix from thick and tight to thin and jelly-soft.'[80] Alongside the process of effacement: mucal plug, rupture of membranes, 'involuntary defecat[ion]' (Nelson, p. 84), blood and waters. 'Hot water rushes over the table' (Brady, p. 84); 'The waters are broken. It feels tremendously good. I am lying in a warm ocean' (Nelson, p. 132).

All this liquid reiterates how effacement is always at risk of moving from dissolving to drowning. It fluctuates between despair and happiness. It's painful: 'the pain of childbirth' (Brady) and of 'my painful unbirth' (Notley). A mother might be suspended at the pinnacle, glutted there, or she might be engulfed, might drown in that 'warm ocean'. But until she does, she remains paused, poised upon that 'if', giving voice to a self structured by its own effacement.

The profound, often painful, embodiment of giving birth and mothering is, Jarvis claims, a strong reason for this loss of self. She concurs with Cusk, writing that 'motherhood is impersonal […] not defined by any aspect of your personality or your mind; your being with your child is

[78] Jarvis, 'No One Thinks of Rilke in the Recovery Room' <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/no-one-thinks-of-rilke-in-the-recovery-room/> [accessed 14 March 2022]
[79] Jarvis, 'No One Thinks of Rilke in the Recovery Room' <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/no-one-thinks-of-rilke-in-the-recovery-room/> [accessed 14 March 2022]
[80] Eliza Rotterdam, 'Eliza Rotterdam in conversation with Maggie Nelson' <http://www.abradstreet.com/post/80357799502/in-conversation-maggie-nelson-with-eliza> [accessed 8 January 2018]

enough to make you a mother'.[81] But, reading these testimonies of loss does not simply point to its causes, but crucially exposes further elements of a mother's subjectivity, specifically her 'practical, lived way of understanding and experiencing the self' (Stone, p. 3).[82] A mother's experience of effacement is a psychic and somatic experience, one in which she finds that she is unrecognizable to herself and to others. Any sense of singular selfhood, both mental and physical, is overwritten by a generalized maternal selfhood, which has no relation to her own particular experience. Indeed, the tolerance of effacement on the page might appear to belie the real-world difficulty of coping with this state of being. Juhasz extrapolates on the lived difficulty of inhabiting the identity 'mother':

> as a self-identity, it turns out to be one that is in our culture especially problematic to attain and maintain. For maternal subjectivity demands the negotiation of multiple states of being, or subject positions, which may seem dramatically different from one another and are often experienced as contradictory.[83]

Parker develops this idea, writing that '[a]ccepting that hatred, resentment and hostility are unavoidable components of the full range of feelings for a child throws doubt [...] on the reality of a mother's capacity for love in both her own and others' eyes' (p. 49). Both authors highlight that a mother's sense of effacement on becoming a mother is in a large part due to an absence or lack of recognition of the realities of maternal subjectivity from the outside, but both see means of creatively responding to this experience and thereby altering understandings of it.

Parker claims that the anguish, frustration and 'conflicts generated by maternal ambivalence are potentially creative' (p. ix) and that it is specifically the co-existence of opposing experiences that is 'fruitful' (p. 6). This ambivalent quality of maternal experience is for Parker generative and empowering, it gives agency rather than curtailing it. Juhasz envisages the page as a space in which these contradictory states can be played out: 'their linguistic embodiment brings them into being in the same textual space', thus demonstrating 'that they all exist, contrary to popular opinion' and bringing into being that 'recognition' which 'is a crucial agent in the creation of identity'.[84] This is of course that very same recognition that Cusk sought in the mirror, and in the 'literature and practices', 'values' and 'codes of conduct' (Cusk, *Aftermath*, p. 19) of motherhood.

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[81] Jarvis, 'No One Thinks of Rilke in the Recovery Room' <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/no-one-thinks-of-rilke-in-the-recovery-room/> [accessed 16 March 2022]
[82] Stone, p. 3.
[83] Juhasz, pp. 90-1.
[84] Juhasz, pp. 91, 90.

The potential of the text as space in which an ambi-valent selfhood can take form is explicit in these examples of maternal writing. In then a mother dwells in experiences that would be harder to inhabit in real life – Walsh's narrator can be suspended between drowning and not; Schor's can go on acting out life while dead; Notley's can choose both, 'two poems one sentimental and one not', 'his birth and my painful unbirth'. The page offers a terrain on which an effaced self can be depicted and can be witness to its own effacement. Moreover, this loss of self can be performed, thereby shaping and voicing a selfhood that a mother might be unable to access in her day to day. For Juhasz, this is what matters. She states that writing offers a potential means to:

> construct or even create maternal subjectivity by bringing the aggregate of identities that mothers possess into being in the same textual space and establishing a viable relationship, or "grammar," between them, a process that is frequently difficult to achieve in lived experience.[85]

Writing becomes a constructive space through which mothers might construct their subjectivity. Where a mother's experience of effacement is often caused by a failure to recognise herself in a fixed identity 'mother' constructed by others, that the page might offer a means through which a singular identity, 'I, mother', can be created is very suggestive.

It is worth pausing at this point in order to summarise what textual commonalities become apparent when studying effacement, and what the embodied experience of effacement effects in the texts themselves, in order to continue building a poetics of motherhood. Genre becomes relevant here. Conventional memoir might take issue with these episodic, incoherent narratives, and incohesive selves. Here the texts I have looked at are poems, short stories, and hybrid works. What they share is testimony to a maternal experience of effacement and a tendency to 'traffic in the grey area where fiction and nonfiction cooperate'.[86] 'Pretend it's fiction' (p. 120), the narrator in 'Drowning' bids herself, and thus bids the reader to query whether it is indeed fiction as stated on the back cover of the book or in fact non-fiction? The reader too is suspended not so much in a 'grey area', but in an area where both fiction and non-fiction are operating. For Laura Di Summa-Knoop, the 'contra-standard features' of many of these texts call into being a new sub-genre of memoir, which she calls 'critical autobiography'. These features include a tendency to 'flirt closely with fiction and literary criticism' to include 'intentional ambiguities' and to refrain from a narrative structure based on 'explicit causal connections and […] the need to find emotional and moral

[85] Juhasz, p. 92.
[86] Di Summa-Knoop, pp. 5, 8.

closure', thus doing away with 'the notion of the "narrative self"'.[87] *The Argonauts* is given as a prime example of this sub-genre:

> Nelson's memoir breaks the page in detached paragraphs which alternate rather brilliant literary and philosophical criticism with tassels of poetry; her life does not come in a story, it comes in flashes of brilliance, with a style and a pulse that has nothing of the more relatable, intimate and (polished) quotidian effortless tone that more traditional memoirists often adopt.[88]

The Argonauts is labelled 'memoir/criticism', establishing the *bothness* of the self's experience and of theory. *Mutability* is subtitled 'Scripts for Infancy', and these so-called scripts move between prose, diary entry, and poem, and are daubed with quotes from poets and theorists alike. This sub-genre is a more appropriate zone for an experience of effacement, for it does not entail the need for a complete narrative self. Rather it allows for identities that are troubling to inhabit to be given form, constructed and performed. For an 'I' that is not monolithic, fixed, reified, but dynamic and ambivalent. It is a genre that, to reiterate Brady, seeks to 'catch not cauterise' and thereby undermines the possibility of a single interpretation and frustrates attempts to produce a reified maternal subject.

Compelled as it is by an urgent need to testify to maternal experiences, while distrustful of autobiographical conventions, prompted by motherhood's refusal to fit to such modes, maternal writing gives itself particularly well to this sub-genre, which draws together material experience with theory in its many guises, and inhabits forms that often eschew linearity and causality, choose bittiness over cohesion. The features of this sub-genre are echoed at a more granular level in the variety of registers that are inhabited in the texts as they switch from diary to poem, from theory to memoir, from anecdote to analysis, holding to their ambivalence.

How then do these texts of effacement act in the world? Most crucially, texts that testify to the existence of ambivalent subjectivities and demonstrate that 'contrary to popular opinion', these opposing stances 'all exist' construct versions of maternal subjectivity that affirm the reader's own personal experiences. This acknowledgement works towards dismantling taboos, and by entering the archive of maternal testimony promises to incur a shift in the imaginary of motherhood. The potential of these reclamative avowals of effacement is both to empower mothers and to incite changes in this static group identity 'Mother'. In so doing, the texts enact a

[87] Di Summa-Knoop, pp. 1, 6, 8.
[88] Di Summa-Knoop, p. 8.

politics that works to demythologise and de-essentialise the maternal subject, nudging towards possible ambivalent configurations of maternal subjectivity, while eschewing cauterization.

Effacement reveals other qualities beyond that rigid position of unsurmountable loss so often attested to in mothers' experiences of early motherhood. In these texts, mothers do not look mournfully over their shoulders but pitch themselves into effacement whose dynamic and generative capacities are enacted on the page. Effacement is empty, but it is also glutted, it brings despair *and* happiness, it is painful and it can be purposeful. Effacement is exposed as a space of potential and thereby makes of the mother an agent, establishing motherhood as a foundation for action, not 'a defection' as Cusk put it in *A Life's Work*. It sketches a vision of motherhood that leads to a configuring of maternal subjectivity as ambivalent, fluctuating and dynamic. And these qualities extend outwards, not just to reconfigure the maternal subject but to inform the maternal imaginary. A minute opening deep within the body reverberates with ways of thinking.

O B J E C T S

You have a hand. Lying on the playmat with its fish flaps and blinking shells, stirring the air, you accidentally tapped the dangling octopus. This serendipity turns, in the course of an hour, into curiosity at your own effectiveness: find a way to connect again. Toy eyes sing with smiles in the schematic, primitive face. Your omnipotence descends from the general to the special as you lift your arm and strike. Hurray for the ready-to-hand. Hurray for the ontic. What could be more profound than this discovery: you have a hand. Your hand can do things to the world. Matter appreciates you. What an outing. I videotaped it and, days later, accidentally deleted it. (Brady, pp. 60-1)

'You have a hand.' It is through this handing – 'Hurray for the ready-to-hand. Hurray for the ontic' – that the infant comes to know the material world. A world that makes itself known through its matter, through the hard, tappable materiality of 'the dangling octopus', one which, once connected with, is sought out again. The poem details an early encounter with the synthetic world, one which acknowledges the beginnings of the infant's agency, its propulsion towards autonomy, 'Your hand can do things to the world', and therein the beginnings of its separation from its mother, on the trajectory from dependence to independence.

This personal pronoun 'you', the baby, is the most apparent figure in *Mutability*. The appearances of 'I', the mother, are, in contrast, fleeting. Indeed, the 'I' is a slim, shy presence in the text, for these are *Scripts for Infancy*, not Scripts for Maternity, and, as the volume reveals early on, the project is not one of 'getting babies to help us write about ourselves' (p. 15), nor do the poems form part of those '[t]oo many poems that mourn and celebrate the birth of self' (p. 16), rather they are 'love lyrics for the babies as the babies are' (p. 16). The intention of this 'love letter to you' (p. 71), is to give worded form to the baby: to write 'about you, and for you' (p. 107), a project in words that is dependent on the baby's absence of words, 'when you begin to speak for yourself I'll have to stop […] By then we'll finally begin to know you on your own terms' (p. 107). For now, however, while this autonomy is wavering, sliding between independence, 'You're walking everywhere now' (p. 70) and dependence, 'So long as we're behind you, moving you along' (p. 64), 'these cables I am writing' (p. 97) are texts to, about, and for the baby in *the mother's* terms.

It is the baby who is the protagonist, begging the question: where then is the mother? As the 'you' is the baby, known in, or on, the mother's terms, so it is the 'you' of the addressee. The

pronoun's presence both disguises and simultaneously calls into being the 'I', she who addresses. Such is the nature of the 'you': the 'I' that speaks is held, but invisibly so, within it. 'You' is the addressee, the observed, the named, described, designated, and 'I' is she who addresses this 'you'.

This 'I' makes its role more explicit at the end of the stanza: 'I videotaped it and, days later, accidentally deleted it.' I videotaped it. 'I', then, is also the observer, the lens through which the 'you' is seen. This phrase is justly revelatory about the position of the mother in *Mutability*: behind the lens of the video camera, the mother is she who observes, she who makes records then deletes them, and she who makes (written) records of the recording and of its deletion. As such the lenses multiply, the reader of the text finds herself looking in on the mother, recording an instant of looking in on the infant, object of attention.

It appears to be revelatory about subject-object positions, and of the sorts of 'budg[ing] up' that a mother does 'to make room for' (Baraitser, p. 49) an infant. But in fact, the suggestion of a clear division between subject and object, is complicated by the text itself. While the 'I' and 'you' pronouns appear to distinguish between mother and infant, this distinction is far from absolute. 'Where are you?' (p. 85), the lyric voice asks, and responds, 'you're stuck somewhere in between' (p. 85). The first and second person pronouns then, are functions of grammar, and the birth scene is synecdochic of the wider mother-child relation: 'I feel a soft and slick substance, the tangle of hair. It is unmistakeably not part of me, though still within me' (p. 85). The text discerns an entanglement between this 'you' and 'I', where the bounds of each, second and first person, are permeable: 'You pinch us, searching the cavities of our heads' (p. 61), 'you […] are concerned merely to use your face to keep us entangled' (p. 61), 'We are still so much the same person that you scratch my thigh in the bath' (p. 98). And while the mother appears to be she who addresses, she is also she who is addressed: the infant's acts are instances of interpellation to which she responds, with this 'you'. The text admits that it is not in fact 'your infancy nor my motherhood but both together, in-mixed with the writing' (p. 67). It is a third object, or perhaps a 'strange tandem creature' (p. 97) for, although 'I know that she is not me, and that most of what she feels and thinks is inscrutable […] her ultrareliance makes us into a strange tandem creature' (p. 97). The interpellation 'she' occasions a distance and marks a concise divide between mother and infant, one that is far less concise between the 'I' and 'you'. Rather relation between first- and second-person pronoun is suggestive of a proximity and an intimacy, a suggestion that comes, in *Mutability*, to intimate an overlap. The one is housed within the gaze, the words, of the other: 'you' is in and on 'my' terms.

It might indeed be the nature of the 'you' to call up the 'I', but this 'I'-'you' relation apparent in *Mutability* also iterates a pronominal poetics of motherhood. It is reminiscent of the

faltering 'I' glimpsed in maternal writing, the 'I' of Notley's mother, 'I can't tell if they're / me or not', which appeared in my study of interruption. It is the absent-present first-person pronoun that featured in effacement, that 'I' which has become unhitched from itself in Juhasz's 'I am no longer "I"'. And, it is the 'I' that appears in the second of Denise Levertov's 'Three Meditations', a mother, whose many 'I's' are also 'you's', 'I, I, I, I. / I multitude, I tyrant, / I angel, I you, you'.[89] This subject 'I' is one who teeters, stretching to encompass others, slipping into other pronouns, becoming unfamiliar. Brady's 'you' thereby reiterates a grammatical trope specific to maternal experience, in which the pronominal unit 'I' is dislodged. *Mutability* may be *Scripts for Infancy*, but what becomes apparent is that the two, infancy and maternity, baby and mother, are not entirely divisible. Positioning the mother in the world then asks for a further consideration, not to imagine a mother as a delimited object but as a being who slips somewhat, who exists 'somewhere in between' I and you.

Mutability is set out as six separate sections, in each of which the poems and texts cluster around an unnamed but identifiable subject. It is the fourth section in which objects reside. These objects are explicitly those of the child's environment: '*Your* hand can do things to the world. Matter appreciates *you*' (emphasis added). They figure in the child's varying abilities to use them: 'You can put the plastic blocks in the redoubt made of the elephant's front-and-hind legs, and struggle it back out again, then clap yourself. You can throw the Epcot-model ball. Over and over' (p. 55). In this section then, they have various roles, the most apparent of which is to depict the child's perceiving of and changing relation to the world beyond her. A relation which begins with a hand, moves from 'accidentally tapp[ing]', to 'find[ing] a way to connect again' (p. 60) and from there to perceiving, 'You tilt your head from side to side, testing the stability of objects against the motor of your own perception' (p. 61), then to gripping, 'Your pincer's improving, though mostly you curl your thick fist around objects in the grip that kills, trying to edge the apprehensible toward some angle where you can use it' (p. 61). From touching, to reaching, and gumming, 'you who reach for things and put them in your mouth' (p. 57), to eating 'You rip a dried apricot, grinding your gums and guzzling madly' (p. 61), and sucking 'the power to suck through a straw' (p. 65). The child then begins to animate the objects, 'You feed blueberries to the spongy cow, say mmmm, dramatizing everyone's roles' (p. 66), and from sitting moves to crawling, 'Constantly on the move, unhappy if you're left to sit in a pile of objects, unless it's the monstrous surplus of the whole toy box tipped into your lap' (p. 63) and then to walking, 'you turned from the climbing frame's guidewire to pitch yourself into open space' (p. 71). While not

[89] Denise Levertov, 'Three Meditations' <http://www.studiocleo.com/librarie/levertov/prsfrmset.html> [accessed 27 June 2022]

in chronological order, these entries are dated, forming a timeline of a child's coming into the world, one that is narrated directly through her relation to the objects of this world.

Perhaps a mother's attention is first turned to the potency of objects when the infant starts grasping. In the first days of an infant's life, its move from hand to mouth is established, gesturing for milk, chewing on closed fists. But only when about three months old will the infant be able to clasp an object in her hands and place this object in her mouth. She will simultaneously start cutting her first teeth. Mouth and hands, both, are engaged in a sensory exploration of objects, and objects also serve as tools to relieve the pains of teething. From six months or so onward, the infant will begin to be able to move: rolling and crawling, she can trail the home, shovelling the objects she comes across into her mouth. The weaning process then begins and the infant starts to ingest non-liquid objects. An infant's relationship to the objects around her defines where she is in this telos of physical learning, and the objects make this apparent to the mother, as *Mutability* elucidates, 'You can pull a ladybird out of a pot, and the rainbow-coloured rings off a spindle in order: discovering that matter retains its discreteness even in combination, the stability of form and structure' (p. 61). But what it also elucidates is something else: objects *don't* in fact 'retain [their] discreteness', they are not *discrete* entities. Just as the 'I'-'you' relation is suggestive less of a division than an imbrication, so the objects are housed within a relation.

For these objects are, as revealed by the syntax, by the second person pronoun 'you' that precedes them, and by the fact that they are mentioned only in relation to the infant, bound within the infant's relation to them. The object is marked because it is acknowledged by the infant: she taps, connects, grips, grinds, guzzles, sucks, feeds etc. the object. It is a medium through which she encounters, and begins to relate to, the world, and its position is defined in relation to her. '[A]nointed by attention' (p. 62), the object is made apparent by the infant, but what the object reveals is less about itself than about the infant – an object works as a signifier through which the infant can be interpreted.

But again the multiplication of lenses, for the child's anointing is mimicked by the mother's, the poet's attention to this giving of attention. For the poet, the objects are a means through which to interpret the infant's relation to the world. The poet's gaze makes this relation intelligible: the objects are analogies, symbols, representations, they are philosophical and psychoanalytical. 'Incorporation was easy for you to understand given your history. Extraction is more rigorous and melancholic. You put the ball in the hole of the orange plastic ring, flip it over, put it back in the ring'. While they relate specifically to the child, 'you', through the poet's scrutiny the objects make meaning beyond themselves, they might teach 'the principle of Aristotelian form' for example, be used for 'testing out the limits, the properties' (p. 55) or even establish a sense of time:

> Mostly you nest in objects. High up in your chair you cast them down. Then watch them in repose on the floor around you, pink rattly beans. Or put them behind you, drop them backward onto the rug where they make no noise and become invisible. This is your way of accessing the past. (p. 55)

The mother's relation to these objects is one of attending to how the infant relates to them and what roles they play in her life, as this enables her to understand the infant's relation to the world, and mark developmental stages in that infant's life. While it is the infant who is depicted as 'anoint[ing] [them] by attention', it is in fact the mother who is doing so, whose attention is the first person subject of this second person address. The position of the mother again becomes apparent in this act of anointing both child and child's objects with attention. She is the 'I' who is looking on, and who is making sense of the infant's being in the world by means of the objects. This exacting attention situates these objects within the practice of childrearing and of care, and thus offers a means of conceiving of a maternal relation to objects.

Once again, an overlap is apparent between the child's world and the mother's. This overlap is important for it speaks to an understanding of motherhood not as itself an object, something that absconds itself within a mother, but as something that situates itself somewhere between a mother and a child. Anointed with attention, these objects are an astute expression of this: they're 'stuck somewhere in between' inhabiting this imbrication between mother and child. The maternal topos is object-rife; as Baraitser puts it, 'Where there is a mother and infant, there is always some stuff' (p. 125). And it is through this stuff, Baraitser suggests, that 'this relationship [between mother and child] is enacted' (p. 125). Its role is apparent in the opening passages of Walsh's short story 'Young Mothers', which is collected alongside 'Drowning' in *Vertigo*:

> It's not so much that we were young, because some of us were already old, old enough for grey hairs. It's more that our children had made us young. Already in the youth of our young motherhood our children had given birth to our function. […] You could tell because we acquired new things made from young materials. Our things were smooth, plastic, round-cornered, safe: clearly designed to be used by the very young.[90]

[90] Joanna Walsh, 'Young Mothers', in *Vertigo* (High Wycombe: And Other Stories, 2016), pp. 41-44 (p. 41). Further references to this story are given after quotations in the text.

There's a sense here of an identity that moves across from child to mother, that a mother is a mother via her child, or that to be a mother is to be a bit child. Indeed, the mother's acquisition of 'new things made from young materials' impresses upon the reader a merging that happens between the two. This is situated within the 'things' themselves: it is with the 'things' that the mother-child relation is depicted. '[S]mooth, plastic, round-cornered, safe', they are designated 'our things': they are of mothers, and not of children, and yet they are 'clearly designed to be used by the very young'. Inserted so early on into the story, these things are used as a means, ironic as it is accurate, of conveying this newfound identity, mother. It's not clear where the mother ends and the child starts, but the 'things' stand in for the point where the two meet.

'Our things' as mothers aren't the things of adulthood but the things of the 'very young' suggests the narrator. The 'things' are all that comes with a child, and indeed with the practice of mothering. But, notes Baraitser, all the stuff that we tend to associate with children, or childhood, is really the stuff of the mother, 'many of these objects may be better described as "maternal objects". They are in fact the things that a mother uses in her child-rearing work' (p. 126). Baraitser's suggestion that these objects of childhood could be designated 'maternal objects' offers a means of reading this quote from 'Young Mothers'. By establishing these things 'designed to be used by the very young' (p. 41) just as those 'blunted colourful things, each innocuous, safe to suckle' (Brady, p. 60) of *Mutability,* as 'maternal objects' they can be firmly positioned within the scope of the maternal. They are the tools used in the practice of mothering, one which Ruddick delineates as the responsibility to preserve an infant's life and foster her growth in an appropriate manner, a labour 'of preservative love, nurturance, and training'.[91] What then comes of 'tracing a mother's relation to the […] various objects that furnish her world, to see what they do to her, and what they offer her' (p. 125). What do objects *do to* and *offer* a mother, and what does this indicate about mothers in the world?

The terms I have used so far, 'things', 'stuff' and 'objects', while referring to the same category of items, are not strictly interchangeable, and my preference for 'objects' relates to the distinctions that this term holds. The term recognises a capacity to invest in it: an object is not just a thing but an intention, a 'thing to which a specified action, thought or feeling is directed'.[92] An object of attention. It is capacious, and suggestive of a whole ream of affective and interrelational possibilities. Moreover, the proximity of the term 'object' to the term 'subject' makes it relevant here. An object is defined in opposition to a subject. It is '[a] thing which is

[91] In *Maternal Thinking,* Ruddick describes maternal work as that of responding to three demands: 'These three demands – for preservation, growth, and social acceptability – constitute maternal work; to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training', p.17.
[92] 'Object', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online] <https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/129613?rskey=shStFX&result=1> [accessed 27 June 2022]

perceived, thought of, known, etc.; *spec.* a thing which is external to or distinct from the apprehending mind, subject, or self'.[93] While a subject is 'A being that thinks, knows, or perceives […] esp. as opposed to any objects external to it'.[94] In understanding the object to be that which is perceived by the subject, I am marking a shift in my attention from a focus in previous chapters on how the maternal subject perceives herself, to here, how the maternal subject perceives what is external to herself. I also turn this lens around to consider how a mother, encumbered by objects, might be perceived in the world. In this chapter then a mother is understood to be 'both subject and object, […] simultaneously living in space and positioned in space' (Baraitser, p. 128). Maternal objects are understood to be those things used in mothering, things that exist at the limits of the maternal subject, at the point this subject meets the world.

That these objects are so specifically tied into maternal identity becomes perhaps more salient on the loss of a child, 'When you become a mother, you acquire not a uniform exactly, but an array of items that label you as parent: the pram, the sling, the nappies and muslins,' writes poet Rebecca Goss in her doctoral thesis, 'The Dark Hollow of Her Pram'. 'When your child dies', she continues, 'such paraphernalia becomes detritus'.[95] This paraphernalia that mothers acquire, fill their home with, heft around with them, is, suggests Goss, an essential component of maternal identity, it is a set of labels with which they signify 'mother'.

It is primarily due to their utility that these objects feature so in a maternal identity: a mother harnesses the qualities of the object to enhance her labour, they are tools through which she can extend her mothering capacities. The objects touched upon so far are of this order: they are part of her child-rearing arsenal, they are selected for what they *offer* a mother. Each stage of an infant's life brings with it a whole new set of objects. In the first year alone, a baby might drink milk, for example, from a breast, from a bottle, from a Doidy cup (a dual-handled cup with a slanted front edge), from a spouted trainer cup, from a sippy cup, a cup with a handle, a glass, even 'suck through a straw' (Brady, p. 65). Each of these modes of imbibing comes with further possible adornments: nipple shields and creams, nursing bras and breast pads, a variety of teats (slow flow to fast flow), a breast pump (single or double, manual or electric), a steriliser. As each object brings with it a set of further objects, so the objects aren't limited in number, but rather

[93] 'Object', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online] <https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/129613?rskey=shStFX&result=1#eid> [accessed 27 June 2022]
[94] 'Subject', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online] <https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/192686#eid20054373> [accessed 27 June 2022]
[95] Rebecca Goss, 'The Dark Hollow of Her Pram: a study of a mother's grief and its public disclosure' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia, 2019), pp. 51-2.

they proliferate, each calling more into use. Each addition to the list requires further specific knowledge as to its use, further insinuating it into maternal practice: it is not simply the addition of the object but the addition of a series of actions that the object requires that a mother must incorporate. There has been a propensity to think of the post-industrial abundance of appliances and technologies as a deskilling, as rendering of knowledge and manual skills redundant, but that is to ignore the plethora of new skills each of these appliances requires. Constantly upskilling, a mother becomes a walking operating manual versed in the procedures with which to handle each new object that she confronts in her task of raising children. For Baraitser, the omnipresence of these objects within maternal work renders them central:

> Because of its connection with notions of materialism and consumerism, there is a tendency perhaps to characterize stuff as the despised substance, set apart or at least tangential to human-to-human relations. However […] cultures consist not only of social relations, but also of material relations, and […] those relations are not just instruments of social relations involved in the creation of symbolic meaning, but essential aspects of culture in their own right. (p. 125)

Much maternal writing attests to this tendency to 'bracket off the clutter and characterize the mother-infant relationship as some kind of pure or uncontaminated channel of communication' (p. 125). There's a pleasure in this 'cave research' (Nelson, p. 36), in inhabiting a dark womby space, in staying within the intimacy of this 'immersive bubble' (p. 36), in contemplating from within. A number of texts however embrace this clutter. They are strewn with objects, just as a house might be, the objects are dangled between the narrative main thrust of the narrative, and sometimes they stand in for it. Their presence offers a means of deciphering maternal relations to the world, and of simultaneously positioning a mother in the world. The way in which the texts frame the objects shapes how they are perceived: they signify not as objects per se but as part of a method – maternal objects don't appear detached from their use, but are hinged to their procedures, to the instructions and the negotiations that ally them to the world. Indeed, the objects themselves often appear to get lost in their procedures, to exist instead as practical and affective modes of relation. In Elisa Albert's novel, *After Birth,* for example, objects feature prominently on three separate occasions. The narrator, Ari, a new mother, berates how the baby has come between her and her husband, Paul:

> Please just shut up with the fucking wheels on the fucking bus. Can we just drink our coffee in peace? Please ignore the baby for a minute and talk to me. The baby is fine. The baby is safe. The baby is happy. And I'm kind of terrifically lonely, over here. Maybe rub my neck? Maybe rub my feet? Maybe make me dinner, make me laugh?[96]

The couple's relationship is mediated first through the baby, and then, as the text continues, through the objects that come with the baby:

> Now it's all, *do you think another banana will constipate him* and *did you pack the wipes and an extra shirt and the bib* and *we can talk about it but honestly a little diluted juice once in a while seems like no biggie* and *where are the socks* and *did you remember the thermos* and *it's too cold for no pants don't you think*? (p. 86)

Here material relations with objects can be seen to have intervened: they stand in for the couple's social relations. Objects are both a mode of relating and a means of configuring a relationship between the two parents: the objects speak for their partnership. In a second example, objects permeate the conversation between protagonist mother and her friend who is having difficulty getting pregnant:

> We visit on the device while I fold laundry. […] They're trying, but four months have gone by and nothing is happening.
> *It's been a while*, she says. *I'm getting kind of worried.*
> A tiny green sock in need of a mate. […]
> *So how did you decide to go for it?*
> *I did nothing to prevent it. Then some time went by and it happened.*
> Teeny-tiny T-shirt.
> *I mean, like, how long? How much time?*
> *I don't know. A year?*
> That tiny green sock's mate. (pp. 101-2)

The items of laundry are scattered through the conversation, pervading the text. Ari's attention is split between the tense discussion and the task at hand, her feelings though, seem to be focussed

[96] Elisa Albert, *After Birth* (London, Chatto & Windus: 2015), pp. 85-6. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

not on her friend, but on the items of clothing in her hands. Her fondness towards these objects is given in the descriptions of them, 'tiny', 'teeny-tiny' and 'in need of a mate', they are suggestive of affection and endearment: the attention to the child's clothing is equivalent to the attention that might be given to a child. Qualified by adjectives, the objects are figurative – they appear to speak for the relation between mother and child.

Objects feature for a third time in *After Birth* when Ari enumerates her maternal tasks, 'Make oatmeal, fill the sippy. Assist with spoon. Invent a game with blocks' (p. 123). Here they are indivisible from the task that accompanies them: action plus object, action plus object. There is no expression of fondness here, no relation that is being depicted, rather objects enumerate the weary repetitiveness of mothering. Punctuation – commas and full-stops – hinges the tasks together and paratactic sentences give a rhythm of sameness, of mundanity. Recalling the pronominal stance of *Mutability*, where the 'I' gives precedence to the 'you', here it's the inanimate, the synthetic that presides, while the mother vanishes behind the tasks at hand. But the objects are not disarticulated from the mother, just as they are hinged together in sentences, so are they hinged to the mother for she is in the invisible labour behind the objects: they are animated by her, and she herself has become unidentifiable behind them. In this case, the subject mother has become indistinguishable from the labour of mothering and the objects used to mother.

A similar enumeration appears in 'Milk' by Doireann Ní Ghríofa, which begins with a pregnant mother of two describing her day-to-day. Again, commas act like joints articulating the movement between one object and the next, between one procedure and the next. They don't belong to the narrative's forward motion, but to another sort of time, to '[e]very morning', a repeated, monotonous temporality:

> Every morning is much the same: I feed the boys, wave my husband to work, fill the dishwasher, pick up toys, clean spills, glance at the clock, […] read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* three times, try to wash baby spit from my ponytail in the bathroom sink, fail, make a tower of blocks to be knocked, attempt to mop, give up when the baby cries, kiss the knees of the toddler who slips on the half-washed floor, glance at the clock, wipe spilled juice, set the toddler at the table with a jigsaw puzzle, carry the youngest upstairs for his nap.[97]

[97] Doireann Ní Ghríofa, 'Milk', *The Dublin Review,* 70 (2018), 61-72 (p. 61). Further references to this text are given after quotations in the text.

Again the personal pronoun 'I' disappears as the list of actions and objects continues. Here however, this norm, this ongoingness, has a positive value to it, one that is elaborated on a few pages later: 'If I am washing dishes, everything must be fine. If I am scrubbing scrambled egg from a pot, everything must be fine' (p. 66). The presence of these everyday objects, and the repetition of the tasks that come with them, affirms that everything is continuing as it should: 'If I stay home and hang the clothes on the line, that means everything is normal, doesn't it. I hoover the sitting room' (p. 66). This is set against the instant when everything is not fine, 'The baby is no longer moving. The baby has stopped moving. What the fuck am I doing?' (p. 66). The re-emergence of the 'I' breaks into the mechanical task-doing of the everyday. In this instant it reveals the very critical nature of the repetitiveness: the objects and their accompanying tasks serve as a means of reassurance. They affirm and reaffirm the identity 'mother', and that it is functioning as it should. As with Goss's interpretation, at the point of loss, the items of motherhood start to signify potently.

There is another order of objects that features equally, if not more acutely, in maternal experience. These objects, which until abutting against the infant have gone unnoticed, accrue in value in the maternal topos. The world introduces itself as categories of pleasure and danger' (p. 63), writes Brady, and this second category, 'danger', illuminates a further aspect of maternal labour and identifies a shift in perception on becoming a mother, one in which the known, ordinary world, has become dangerous. Particularly to 'you who reach for things and put them in your mouth' (p. 57), and '[c]hew all plastic at hazard of your life' (p. 72). I have noted already how objects are caught up in the relation of care, but dangerous objects reveal another side to this care relation, that of preservation, or 'preservative love' (Ruddick, p. 17). They pertain thus to a distinct area of maternal labour: a mother is required to be skilled for hypothetical object occurrences, object-specific events that *could* happen. Of these, the possibility of the infant choking is perhaps the most recurrent, one marked in Jenny Offil's *Dept. of Speculation*:

> I walk outside with the baby on my shoulders. She reaches out, puts something in her mouth, and chokes on it. "Hold her upside down!" my sister yells. "Whack her hard on the back!" And I do until the leaf, green, still beautiful, comes out in my hand.[98]

The Heimlich manoeuvre is designed to remove foreign objects from a person's airways. In the case of infants, the procedure is the following: 'Place the infant face down across your forearm (resting your forearm on your leg) and support the infant's head with your hand. Give four forceful

[98] Jenny Offill, *Dept. of Speculation* (London: Granta Books, 2014), pp. 31-2.

blows to the back with the heel of your hand. You may have to repeat this several times until the obstructing object is coughed out.'[99] Or, in other words: 'Whack her hard on the back!'. This manoeuvre calls attention to a further role of objects in the province of motherhood: objects have been seen to enable but they can also hinder. Those that hinder, just as those that enable, elicit specific kinds of attention from the part of a mother, housing them in the practices that accompany them.

What does this practice of preservative love look like, and how do objects signify differently within it? Motherhood as Department of Speculation is a fitting notion here, for the work of preservation is one of precaution. To be precautious is to be cautious in advance, to prepare for what might occur, to speculate. The labour of preservation is in part one of imagination: in constant readiness for what *might* happen, a mother imagines scenarios from the probable to the improbable in order to prevent them. This imaginative, speculative work fills the days as the nights, as depicted in *The Argonauts*, 'in that ecstatic, disarranged week of almost no sleep, my intense happiness was sometimes punctured in the dead of night by the image of him with a half scissor sticking out of his precious newborn head' (p. 119); in *Mutability,* 'I toss and turn next to a set of barbells on the guest bed, full of nightmares that you're drowning, suffocating, falling' (p. 107); and in Jarvis's essay, 'Woman Problems':

> After a few months, I was still so anxious that I checked my son every few minutes, putting my hand on his chest, watching for the rise and fall of his breath. […] I would wake from a dead sleep and cast about, looking for the baby in the bedclothes. My husband, worried, and then irritated, and then worried again, would say quietly, and then a bit louder: "Claire, he's in the crib. He's in the crib. Fucking hell, Claire, he's in the crib!" But even as my son's sleep slowly became a little more regular—two-hour patches, sometimes three—I was still awake. If I did sleep, I woke in terror, certain that he wasn't breathing, that he was in the bed with me, that he had fallen (somehow? how?) under the living room couch, and I needed to go and pull him out.[100]

The magnitude of attention a mother pays to this work of preservative love is palpable in these testimonies of night terrors. The dependency of the child and her inability to decipher what is dangerous, results not only in maternal anxiety and the resulting precautions but in turn projects

[99] 'Be ready for emergencies', *Harvard Health Publishing*, 1 January 2020 <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/emergencies-and-first-aid-heimlich-maneuver-on-an-infant> [accessed 27 June 2022]
[100] Jarvis, 'Woman Problems', *n+1*, 10 February 2017 <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/woman-problems/> [accessed 27 June 2022]

agency into the objects themselves, as can be seen in Nelson's image of the 'half-scissor'. The infant's lack of empowerment ('precious newborn') results in a reciprocal empowerment of the object: objects harness the power to do harm, they gain autonomy. This imaginative work is one of animation, Jarvis's '(somehow? how?)' recognises that, in animating the yet-unmoving infant into an ability to clamber out of the crib and fall under the couch, she is imagining beyond what is possible. In this fraught environment, and in direct correlation with the child's inability to look after herself, the passive object becomes active. There's a mirroring of the infant's mode of being in the world here, mother and infant, both, are engaged in the imaginative work of animating the inanimate.

The objects that appear in these depictions of danger: 'all plastic', 'the leaf, green, still beautiful', 'a half-scissor', 'the living room couch', work in the texts as material specifications of this element of maternal labour: they make the work of preservation material and thus render it visible. As with the enumerations in *After Birth* and 'Milk', through being attended to, the objects implicated in the practice of mothering render this practice concrete: they account for maternal labour, in ways that the labour cannot account for itself. Not distinct from the procedures that accompany them however, nor from the acting body that makes use of them, rather objects are hinged to their verbs, their pronouns or absence of pronouns, much as they are hinged to this acting body, and they serve to speak for these things. While maternal objects serve to extend the limitations of the body, through what they *offer* a mother, in so doing they can also be seen to *do* things *to* this body, 'encumber[ing]' (p. 126) it, to use Baraitser's term, and troubling its limits.

This somatic relation is perhaps most apparent when a mother goes out into the world. For, while motherhood is predominantly conducted in the private space of the home, objects' effect on – what they *do to* – a mother, becomes more visible when this domestic space is breached. To venture outside with a child, a mother has to gather all the necessary and potentially necessary objects from about the house, plus a plethora of objects necessary for use only outside the house. This scenario is depicted in 'Milk':

> Now the baby must be anoraked, kissed and clipped into his buggy, pacified with a rice cake. The toddler must be enticed away from his Duplo tower, zipped into his coat and offered the bribe of a lollipop to coax him to walk into town. The box is bulky and heavy. The only way I can carry it is by perching it above the buggy handles, secured clumsily by chin and elbow, while I shove the buggy along the path. It takes fifteen minutes to negotiate what is otherwise a five minute walk to the post office. (p. 63)

A baby and a toddler, a buggy, a rice cake, and a lollipop accompany a mother and a box of bottles of pumped milk to the post office. The objects are 'bulky' and 'heavy', they make the mother clumsy, she doesn't push the buggy but 'shove[s]' it, and with all these additions a journey of five minutes takes fifteen. The objects, gathered to aid the mother, in fact hinder her. More discernible than inside the home, where the objects are dispersed, is the effect of objects on the maternal body when outside, where a concentrated version of the maternal relation to objects becomes apparent. '[W]eighed down by a number of other objects she brings with her so that her hands are not free, so that her body is not mobile in the way it used to be' (Baraitser, p. 130), the mother is encumbered. She's awkward, clumsy. But it's not only her own experience of her body that differs, but the way that body is perceived. Here, the reader envisages a heavily pregnant woman pushing a buggy in which a child is sitting, while another toddles alongside with a lollipop, a box is perched on the handles of the buggy, held between the mother's chin and her elbow. It's hard for the onlooker to decipher the point at which the mother ends and the objects begin. A similarly suggestive depiction appears in a passage from 'My Death' that I first looked at when studying effacement:

> With the baby in my arms, I bent down, took out his blanket, bottle, and his toys, put them alongside him in one arm; then with the other hand I lifted the huge bag of groceries out by the top of the bag – balancing it gently so the whole top didn't tear off – and settled it in my other arm. (p. 301)

In Schor's description, each of the mother's arms is held out to the side of her body to carry things: one holds a child and the objects that he requires, the other, the groceries. Again, the body is charged, its bounds are not clear. This, 'mother-plus-baby-plus-buggy-plus-stuff' (Baraitser, p. 148), is an acute description of a mother's lived body. The objects that the mother has elected ('blanket', 'bottle', 'toys') to enable her, equally obstruct her. The fact that the same objects can by moments facilitate then impede her labour highlights a further element of maternal relations to objects, for they are not fixed, but constantly reconfiguring, 'chang[ing] the relations between mother and child as well as between the mother and her environment, and ultimately the mother and her self' (Baraitser, p. 139). The objects model this maternal relation to the world and to her self, establishing that, via its relationality, a maternal subjectivity is a transitory, changing one. In establishing themselves as part of maternal praxis and maternal relations, objects insinuate themselves into a maternal soma, an incorporation which finds a more extreme manifestation in Jarvis's essay 'Cankerworms':

> I didn't understand just how much gathering together a new baby needs, or how much that gathering together can drain one of abstract identities like "woman" and "mother," leaving behind only a shapeless, vague body that acts and reacts to the stimuli of the baby's needs. I was ready to feel less like myself. I wasn't ready to feel less like a person and more like a carrier, a feeding machine, or a rocking chair.[101]

Here, maternal praxis, maternal relations, and the maternal body have merged to such an extent that the 'person' has metamorphosed into one of these maternal objects, 'a carrier, a feeding machine, or a rocking chair'. Objects are so intrinsic to maternal praxis that they are no longer perceived as extensions of maternal labour or expressions of maternal relations, but the two mother and maternal objects, have converged to become an object. This recalls Louise Bourgeois' series of paintings and later prints entitled *Femme Maison*, in which the term 'housewife' or 'house woman' is taken literally: the woman's body becomes part house, her face, her mouth, and her gaze, are often obstructed by the building, in some a small hand rises from it, part in salute, part in a cry for help.[102] And as with Bourgeois' images, the layering of objects onto the maternal body makes it harder to see. To look 'mumsy', is to lack in sharp outlines. This shapelessness attributed to the maternal body is exacerbated by the presence of the infant, on hips, shoulders, around legs, making for the 'strange tandem creature' (p. 97) Brady writes of. With the addition of objects, the contours of this 'shapeless, vague body' distort further. Her silhouette is profuse, handling and hampered by other bodies and objects, it blurs. Her limbs are strung out by the attachments that swing from them, legs multiply, attain wheels, motion is revised, a cup holder, a variety of carabiners cling her to further bags – snack bags, nappy bags, handbags, a toddler's backpack. The maternal body that takes form when laden with objects is something not quite definable, a non-shape. As such it defies pinning down, knowing exactly.

It's a rich vision to end with, this one of the maternal body. Object-encumbered as it is, it can't be fixed, and resists therefore 'build[ing] new models for subjectivity that solidify and reify experience, processes to which "the mother" as metaphor, figure, or trope, is particularly vulnerable' (Baraitser, p. 3). What it does however is to demonstrate the work objects do in re-envisioning embodied maternal subjectivity. Objects worry at borders, they trouble the bounds of a mother. They are suggestive not of bounded autonomous selfhood but of a relational

[101] Jarvis, 'Cankerworms', *n+1*, 14 July 2017 <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/cankerworms/> [accessed 27 June 2022]
[102] Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1984, Photogravure, Philadelphia Museum of Art <https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/341800> [accessed 27 June 2022]

subjectivity. Moreover, objects make a case for a configuration of embodied maternal subjectivity beyond that of biological motherhood, a means of representing 'adoptive maternal bodies or maternal bodies where a child has been born through surrogacy' (Baraitser, p. 124), for example. Objects are particularly suggestive in this case, as they prompt a 'shift to post-birth, post-lactation embodiment' (p. 124), bringing new breadths to conceptualisations of maternal subjectivity.

To complete this picture, I will turn again from how a mother is 'positioned in space' to her experience of 'living in space'. I stated in my introduction that I sought to give voice to maternal subjectivity, to consider a mother as a subject 'in her own right'. But maternity cannot be thought absolutely on its own terms, for the maternal subject is necessarily determined by the presence of a child – 'the concept of "mother" depends on that of "child"' (Ruddick, p. 22). It would be insufficient to theorise a mother entirely in isolation. Reading through the prism of objects clarifies the role of the child in conceiving maternal subjectivity, for objects pertain to the child as to the mother; via the child they become apparent and come to figure in a mother's relational repertoire.

When Baraitser asks 'What is it like to be alongside a child' (pp. 25-6), she does so to think of a maternal subject not as an ontological framework, but as a set of experiences and of transitory states of being. She uses Ruddick's definition of a child as an 'open structure', whose 'acts are irregular, unpredictable, often mysterious' to recognise an impermanence to this child's states of being and modes of thought, for she is understood to be 'changing, growing, reinterpreting what has come before' (Ruddick, p. 96). 'What happens to us when, not only do we live in close proximity to this irregular, unpredictable and mysterious other, but also we are somehow responsible for them to?' (p. 11), Baraitser then asks. It is through objects that these two modes of relating become apparent: they offer a physical manifestation of both a mother's being *in response* to a child, and her being *responsible for* a child. Objects acknowledge this mother-child relation on which maternal subjectivity is premised, they shape it and give it material form as they do to the labours and forms of thinking a mother enacts. Furthermore, objects make manifest how, to use Adriana Cavarero's words,

> the imaginary of maternity permits a shift in attention from a subject modeled on the idea of autonomy to a subjectivity structurally characterized by dependence and exposure, from the assertions of a self-consistent and partitioned subjectivity to a subjectivity that is open and relational.[103]

[103] Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 122.

As such, objects give a material account of maternal subjectivity, speaking of an orientation in and towards the world that is relational, one that is both call and response, one in which a mother is both address and addressee, and one in which she is also 'stuck somewhere in between.'

CODA

This morning, when my three-year-old son left to spend the day with his grandmother, I watched him press his 'baa baa' to his nose and mouth. The blanket, which my grandmother once knitted for me, is a patchwork of coloured squares sewn together into one large rectangle. He holds it to his jaw, and from there it hangs down like a multicoloured appendage to his body. With his 'baa baa' he is immediately quietened, and reassured, he doesn't speak but mewls into it. It functions at his face, and if at night he wakes looking for it, calling out 'baa baa', I return it to him by placing it on his lower jaw. There are rules to the 'baa baa': he elected it, named it, and he is in charge of it; I must never wash it.

Theorised by D. W. Winnicott, a transitional object is an object that an infant attaches to in its transition from 'fist-in-mouth activities' to external objects 'a teddy, a doll'.[104] Transitional objects dwell in an 'intermediate area', while 'not part of the infant's body', they 'are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality', and are placed 'inside, outside, at the border'.[105] These objects figure at a formative stage in the telos of an infant's development, that of 'the initiation of a relationship between the child and the world'.[106] It's in his work on transitional objects that Winnicott's felicitous 'good enough' mother first appears, for through her practice of 'good enough' mothering the infant makes these necessary transitions. Put otherwise, by failing a little, the 'good enough' mother ultimately enables the infant to adapt to the world.[107]

The image of my son and his blanket appendage is not unlike that of a mother and her appendages. Overlaying the one on the other, and considering maternal objects through the lens of transitional objects, solidifies my reading above: it establishes the objects as both *of* and *not of* the self; illuminates a subjectivity premised not on separation, but on relation; and pinpoints the locus of this subjectivity, not within the mother but in an intermediate area 'between mother and child as well as between the mother and her environment, and ultimately the mother and her self'.

[104] Winnicott, 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena', p. 204.
[105] Winnicott, 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena', p. 204.
[106] Winnicott, 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena', p. 217.
[107] Winnicott, 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena', p. 214.

It also marks this subject, mother, as one in transition, one that is not independent but *inter*dependent yes, but also one that is not fixed, but mobile.

However, thinking maternal objects as transitional objects is perhaps most potent for the indicator held therein of a certain kind of mothering practice, a certain kind of mother, the 'good enough' kind. In reading maternal objects as transitional objects, I am presented with the figure not of the ideal mother, but of the 'good enough' mother, it's a pertinent image to be left with.

CLOSING NOTE

I end this PhD with an image of my son. In the depiction he appears pressing a blanket to his face. He was three when I wrote that passage. He's now six. Since then, the original blanket has been lost, to huge and heavily-felt dismay, and he has transferred his attentions to a different, but similarly colourful, piece of cloth. I can't help but smile at the crystallisation of that image – boy and blanket – in this thesis, but also at how Winnicott's rendering of the transitional object – the hard-edged concept elaborated in an essay replete with subsections, enumerated lists, tables and diagrams – fits its messy reality in life so accurately, the boy standing in front of me then, nuzzling a tattered blanket that was once mine.

And yet that's what I have been doing throughout this work: taking my own lived experiences of mothering and shaping them into concepts. From this kitchen table at which I'm writing, trying to find means in which these messy and far-from delimitable everyday experiences might be categorised and fitted to terminology, in order that they might be thought and written. Nor has it been that clear-cut, and indeed, it's hard to know now whether the enquiry began there, prompted by the very matterful encounter with a child, or whether it started with the theory. For, as the mothering has informed my thoughts, so has the theory I've been reading found its physical manifestation in this everyday (as with the 'baa baa'). And the theory hasn't simply elucidated, but often informed and shaped my mothering practice, as suggested by that nice word 'praxis' when it refers to the application of a learned theory in life.

When I started work on this thesis mothering was acute, my two youngest children were ten months old, my eldest just four years old, and the PhD was charged with this acuteness too, as in it too was sharp and tight, fitted into small and concentrated periods of time. There was a clarity to these limitations: when I was working, I was just doing that, and when mothering, just that. I don't want to make it sound too harmonious though, as though the children could be put away in a cupboard while I got on with the work, and then removed when the work was put away. Rather, this practice-based research, as it could be described, has been repeatedly frustrated and complicated by the mothering: children and PhD have consistently jostled for my attention. And this thesis is brimming with the material implications of the one in the other and vice versa. The children's fleshy presences might have nudged me into this work, they have since consistently queried and rewritten it; as such they have also upped the stakes of the project.

External realities have played in too, so this table has been the site not just of hurried breakfasts and the writing of the PhD, but meals have been pushed aside too to make space for

home-schooling, as well as for my own remote teaching. My research has been fraught with these complications, everything has been squeezed in between everything else. I have learnt about the richness of intermittence, of working within time and space limitations, and I have seen how the practice of mothering has grounded and regrounded my work in concrete reality.

One of the struggles I have had when putting this together, by which I refer to this very end project of placing all this writing side-by-side in one document and piecing it together, has been to make of this processual method of working a cohesive object. The sense I have is rather of a mass of disparate texts thought and written over a period of time – nearly six years – in which my living of, and thus my thinking of, motherhood has been in flux. The PhD attests to this, being as it has in constant communication with this other project, that of mothering.

So, when I come now to look at it as a whole, it is the composite nature of the work that is apparent, the intermittence, the processes of change, those periods of intense disruption and those clearer periods. And that's what I see before me, and it seems fitting, it seems appropriate to the project itself. I hope I might have done these many modes of working at this table justice.

17 June 2022

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