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## EXPATRIATES OF "GOOD" MOTHERHOOD: BEARING WITNESS, GUILT, AND BURDENS OF TRANSGRESSIVE MOTHERHOOD

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EXPATRIATES OF “GOOD” MOTHERHOOD:  
BEARING WITNESS, GUILT, AND BURDENS OF TRANSGRESSIVE  
MOTHERHOOD

By

Kelsey Nicole Lueptow

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

EXPATRIATES OF “GOOD” MOTHERHOOD: BEARING WITNESS, GUILT, AND BURDENS OF TRANSGRESSIVE MOTHERHOOD

This thesis by Kelsey Nicole Lueptow is recommended for approval by the student’s Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

EXPATRIATES OF “GOOD” MOTHERHOOD:  
BEARING WITNESS, GUILT, AND BURDENS OF TRANSGRESSIVE  
MOTHERHOOD

BY

KELSEY NICOLE LUEPTOW

To be an expatriate requires emotional stamina to withstand culture shock, loneliness, and self-doubt. To be an expatriate of “good” motherhood is no less shocking, no less lonely, and no less anxiety-inducing. This collection braids original creative pieces with critical inquiry into the roots of disorienting riptides of motherhood mythology. The creative pieces include flash nonfiction essays and poetry; the critical inquiry explores historical narratives, critical theory, feminist theory, and literary narratives. By braiding these different forms, the work aims to create a collage of cultural artifacts, whose composition can better illuminate the darkest corners of elusive motherhood mythology.

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2016

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the APA Style Manual and the Department of English.

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## **Transgressions of Motherhood**

The questions that arise throughout the development of maternal identity feel endless. Everyday brings new anxieties and needs: at what point should I call a doctor? When should he *really* start solid foods or dentist appointments? The questions of marginalized mothers can be quite different. How hungry can I become before I have to claim WIC? Which cashiers don't make a face at my food stamps? What might my child's other parent use against me in court? Amongst all of these questions and anxieties, it took years before I even considered what Joanne Frye poses in *Biting the Moon: A Memoir of Feminism and Motherhood*: "What does it mean to be a mother and a self at the same time? . . . How does my experience as a single mother shed light on the notion of a mother-self . . . ?" Mainly, I hadn't asked these questions because being a "self" had not occurred to me yet. Being a mother, a palatable mother, a praised and well-liked mother, that was my main goal for the first few years. These excerpts from Frye's work instigate my own project questioning cultural constructions of appropriate motherhood and how they affect literature on the subject.

Current discussions of family values and motherhood invoke iconic ideals of tradition and denounce deviance as an undercutting of society in general, creating a deeply complex mythical creature: the perfect mother. A brutally independent and professionally-fueled academic mother such as Dr. Frye diverges from that perfection. I, as a young student-academic mother, also diverge from the ideal. Deconstructing the mythos of this and other familial constructs in terms of history and theory can help access ways in which the literary canon—even if one includes within it transgressive authors such as Dr. Frye and Sylvia Plath—restricts the diverse voices and experiences of



womanhood. The effects of this oppression branch out from stigmatization to internalizing stereotypes that can physically and psychologically harm families, and more specifically, mothers.

This project works to trace cultural narratives of “good” motherhood as they have evolved through history, identify some key manifestations of culturally defined motherhood in literature, and craft new narratives of creative nonfiction and poetry to further illustrate these new metacognitive meditations on cultural pressures of “good” motherhood. The analysis of historical motherhood narratives will trace issues of binarism, privilege, and stigmatization. The literary representations of motherhood in Dr. Frye’s memoir and Sylvia Plath’s poetry will be mined as cultural artifacts that demonstrate the effects of maternal pressures to conform and perform appropriately. The original creative works strive to demonstrate the conflicts explored in the academic analysis in a new artifact using flash nonfiction and poetry. The braided formal structure demonstrates a mother interpellates through various identities of subjectivity and subjugation, according to Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” (1972, p. 175). The creative works also seek to demonstrate the conflict between subjectivity and subjugation, and the inability to view one’s own motherhood outside the cultural ideology, regardless of subversive lifestyle decisions.

The myth of the perfect mother creates a far-reaching web of confusion, guilt, and self-deprecation that can make it hard to function. Any woman who does not fit the iconic “traditional” motherhood mold faces a myriad of problematic assumptions on a daily basis about why she is not part of a glittering white, middle class, nuclear family

reminiscent of the 1950s American sitcom-moms. However, Stephanie Coontz explains in *The Way We Never Were* that motherhood myths of “tradition” ignore that historically women never relied exclusively on a nuclear family for all fulfillment and support (1992, p. 65). In fact, Coontz claims that the “traditional family” is a collage made from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century white middle class family and the diametrically opposed 1920s ideals of family to create a unique family structure that briefly existed for small demographics in the 1950s and became iconic due to the power of television in the collective memory (1992, p.9). Shari L. Thurer asserts in *The Myths of Motherhood* that the myth arose from a Victorian family structure robbed of romance (1994, p. 251). Both historians agree, however, that the traditional family structure is a mirage, at best; it is a “dysfunctional” cornerstone to impossible maternal expectations with lasting damage to health and happiness of families, at worst (Coontz, 1994, p. 210).

This myth of “traditional motherhood” is a direct descendent of encroaching patriarchal ideals on a historically empowering identity. Thurer explains that “Neolithic women were respected and seemed to respect their children,” and that they retained a respected, autonomous place in society well through 600 B.C. when patriarchy began rooting itself in Europe (pp. 17, 26). From 600 B.C. through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the shift from worshipping goddesses such as the Great Mother, an icon of female strength and purpose, toward viewing women as a “stop on the assembly line of baby production” was largely attributed to the implementation of patriarchal practices (Thurer, 1994, pp. 1, 29). By shifting the lens from considering tradition as a reference to patriarchal American motherhood toward considering tradition as a reference to all motherhood practices

throughout time and place, the patriarchal ideal of 1950s sitcom mom seems laughable. Instead it seems more traditional to respect motherhood as an active and powerful station.

Once patriarchy did take root as a dominant cultural ideology and family structure through much of Europe and later America, the demands on motherhood became complex, far-reaching, and subjugated. During the 1800-1900s, motherhood shifted to scientific ideals where mothers were expected to consult experts and develop complex knowledge of the latest parenting literature (Kinser, 2010, p. 39; Thurer, 1994, pp. 225-226). This shift credited women with specialized knowledge necessary to parent, but it also subordinated them to the superior knowledge of male doctors, which undermined and eradicated centuries' worth of lived female experience that had previously been held as expertise by midwives and communities of women. So it was really a demotion with stringent restrictions constantly changing as the professional opinions changed. The 1940s-1980s showed a shift from scientific parenting to “cuddly, twenty-four-hour ‘permissiveness,’” which may seem easy and natural, but can be at least as suffocating to live up to (Thurer, 1994, p. 24). The inclination to view lenient and nurturing motherhood as easier assumes that women are inherently nurturing. However, this maternal expectation actually suppresses basic human emotion of mothers. No matter one's own feelings – frustration, anger, sadness – a mother must always be “cuddly” and understanding inside that family structure. It also shows how sharply the myths of appropriate motherhood can turn, which demonstrates how the myths are culturally constructed, stringent, and to a large extent, arbitrary.

## **The Algebra of Motherhood**

I'm on my knees in my son's empty bedroom. I'm kneading scraps of Kleenex out of the carpet from his tantrum last night, when he would not go to sleep. I'm surrounded by untended toys, by the mussed Batman comforter, by the scraps of Kleenex.

I'm on my knees in my son's empty bedroom attempting the algebra of motherhood on my fingers. I'm counting the ways his father and I have put ourselves together; but,  $2x + 2y$  can only ever be simplified into  $x + y$ , and I was never very good at math to begin with.

I count the way I did not give up my admission to Iowa, to the writing program. I add the concrete communication to his father: from relocation to my waitress apron to two pink lines on one white stick to crying in the third row every time I went to church to my parents pretending they hadn't noticed. I multiply it by the incessancy of tenuous acquaintances: "Oh, you know that's going to be, like, really hard, right?" I divide it by the Thanksgiving my family intervention-ed me into transferring to Green Bay—my toes against the stiff berber of my grandma's sugar-cookie scented family room, by the stifled coughing: "Oh, that's a step down," by over five hundred dollars in Graduate School applications, by the fact that on some weekends my son is four hours away, by the fact that hometowns take sides, split down the middle like the rivet from an earthquake—which I've never really seen before but I know some things about scars.

I multiply us by the man who signed this lease with me. I multiply it by the way my son adores him, by the way he never insults my son's father—not even if he deserves it, not even when I had casually chronicled my past over mid-grade Mexican food on our second date. I multiply it by the way he takes his socks off during a movie and puts them

on my feet—the hollows of his heels at my calves. I divide by *Summa Cum Laude* and relocation.

This time it comes out my  $2x +$  his  $y$ , and there's no way to simplify my family.

I'm on my knees in my son's empty bedroom, and I don't make the bed that he won't sleep in tonight. I don't empty the Vick's humidifier I plugged in at the first sign of a snuffle. I leave Roarin' Rex snuggled lonely into his covers, but peel out the spare pajama parts, the strewn socks, and the hidden snacks. And I let myself cry and wonder and worry before heading to the office, caked in nondescript aloofness and lint.

## Stitches

In the bone-cold neuroses of porcelain,  
the viscosity of my hands in small places,  
I scratch at the varnish of boxes, nails to bolts,  
and feel too much space between finger webs.

I slink pressed palms to your thick eyes.  
Roll your consonants down my throat  
to prove that static shock is just a part of attics  
and hand-me-downs, of caverns and history.

We are small wooden boxes and varnish.  
The space between ribs. We are cherry oak  
on Tuesdays, pine every other weekend,  
and cedar just now as I stretch my ribs across the sky

behind us, showing the birds that we are just  
landing a plane on my clavicle to save space.  
Because my body is all about space.

In the crinkle of a paper-thin morning,  
a patchwork quilting of our wrists together,  
I tell you the story of our first four homes:

glittering space between collapsed cardboard,  
your head on my chest,  
hatching box after box  
after box.

## **At the Ninja Warrior Park**

Most mom groups don't seem to take well to concussive-sarcasm regarding three-year-olds or tee shirts with obscene puns worn because I forgot that I had actually left the house that day. They aren't listed under dragon trainers or ninja warriors, so who would even know where to begin, anyway. Instead, I wear my yoga pants and a thick headband to the park so I can ninja-warrior with my son because he's the most exciting person I know.

Currently, there are eighty-five and a half million mothers in the United States. The same percentages of mothers are working a year postpartum as non-mothers the same age, and when my son was two months old I knew my employer was legally obligated to provide a place to breastfeed but I also knew restaurants were among the most sexist jobs and a simple downstrike of an unrelated Sunday double could crush a month's bills. I knew I could either drop doubles to avoid being demanding and forcing my managers to think about breasts, desexualized, or let my breasts swell and sting and dry themselves out beneath my Brewer's jersey, the change rattling in my apron pockets while my son suckled formula from my mother. Lord knows, I was never one for fuss.

Preschoolers require maternal attention 210 times a day, but there's no mention of what defines this need or attention. At the ninja park, picking at the part of my nails I think might be the cuticle, I don't have a dainty purse or groomed hair. I carry a small army of green toys in my satchel. I'm not very good at shaving my legs or buzzing my son's hair. I've never understood buying all new clothes several times a year—even if you do have the money, and I wear shoes until they melt off my heels and trip me so that no one will ever question my son's footwear or my priorities. My fitness. I'm acutely

aware, while picking at the part of my nails I think might be the cuticle, that I only pluck my eyebrows for weddings, and it makes me feel a little more self-righteous as a mother because this displays my self-sacrifice, my feet digging in behind the swing set.

Preschoolers require maternal attention 210 times a day, but I can't imagine saying this to the perfectly highlighted mother of two, whose oldest says my son is weird and slithers down twitching plastic while my son breaks. She and her friend talk Montessori, and I cringe at the idea of saying my son goes to HeadStart, although I know there is magic in HeadStart mothers; and sometimes at the bottom of the twirly slide, I just need my son to know that his world, his perception, it matters. It matters that the Zakou that I can't see shot lightning that I can't feel, and it knocked him off the second tallest tire, that he has sand stuck in his fingernails and the world is consequentially tainted, that the ominous collapse of sunset over his game of hide and seek feels insurmountable. Sometimes I talk him through a drop attack because a bigger kid didn't want to play zombies and called him weird—clouds of my failure to ask for a quiet room to breastfeed shifting above our heads. It might rain. Sometimes when my son tells me he has boogies, I scramble through my filthy, coffee-stained satchel to find out that I have no Kleenex, no fast food napkin scraps. I debate using a receipt.

Preschoolers require maternal attention 210 times a day, but there's no mention of what defines this need or how one need is parsed out from the last—an ongoing fray of need and screams for which I will arbitrarily be deemed either under or over protective, sometimes both at the same time, depending on the audience or the mood. There is no telling when I will sidestep instead of backstep or leave the juicebox on the picnic table, where it will fall. Whether I should comfort, accommodate, or distance.



A couple approaches the wooden jungle gym dripping cigarette smoke from their lips, daughter in hand, and I imagine the smoke soaking into the wooden struts. I smile, but encourage my son toward the other slide because second hand smoke causes ear infections and asthma and bronchitis, but stigmatization causes more stress, which causes more need for release. I don't want their daughter to feel the hot breath of stigma, but I also imagine her small pink lungs clouding like a drop of dye in water. I know that shaming and judgment do not lead to reformation, so I am at a stalemate. For all I know, this is a calculated risk. Either smoke or breaking points. Sometimes I imagine all the ways I can seem like a failure in my calculated risks. Grading papers at the park. Playing ninjas when there are papers to grade. Moving my son to a basement apartment to follow the dream of stability, and I want to hug the strangers and help ease the pain that begs to be quenched. I wish I was strong enough to forge bonds between every single mother, but my arms are pretty tired. Sometimes when my son tells me he has boogies and I can't find a napkin and we have sand and sun stains up our arms, and we have walked here, to the ninja park, I wipe his nose on the sleeve of my shirt and swing him onto my shoulders to walk home.

## **Metal Sun**

In swift rippling winds,  
the tin-signed grin  
turns her sun-lipped fluidity

as crumbs of gravity  
flit off her thin teeth  
and slap the garden path  
through slats of her  
wheeling arms.

Shadow caves burn  
down the long, green lanes.  
Burn brown grasses.  
Eyebrows. Acrylics.

But the crooked garden patch  
with its sun-crustled mothers  
tends deficiencies  
like burned metal wings.

## **Momism**

I took a quiz online, and it told me that I'm a selfless mother. The possible outcomes for the quiz included loving, affectionate, caring, selfless, and mean, and I want to peel those tiny boxes off the screen and curl them over the trash like carrot skin because there are so many molds, all of them rigid metal, with no overlap. You are either loving or selfless. Caring or mean.

The women in my teaching institute, half of whom are mothers, are thankful to have a room of one's own. Thankful for admission into libraries and courtyards without male escort or written permission. Thankful to be admitted into universities, hired at schools. Thankful there are women in STEM fields, anchoring sporting events. The progress of our century. As they nod, gravely, I wonder what the man who called my sister a lesbian for wearing sneakers into the neuroscience lab—which he intended as an insult—looks like. Does he believe that a poorly groomed beard is as unprofessional as lack of make-up; does he have an over-bite beneath his surgical mask as he explains how she might better sanitize their petri dishes—his one, gangly elbow crooked across the countertop?

Biological essentialism discourse claims that women are inherently suited for housework. It's the core tenet of Republican Motherhood, which mythologized maternal domesticity as a natural emanation from female bodies, rather than thoughtful, demanding work. "Momism" was born out of Freudian rituals of the cold war academics. "Momism" wasn't a real person or even a group of people. "Momism" was the collision of the American Republican Mother and the allegedly brute-like Soviet women whose bodies were just as capable, whose work was just as valuable as Soviet men's. "Momism"

meant to set up clear boundaries between desirable and undesirable motherhood in the 1950s. Boxes lined up, waiting to be checked, like the online quiz that says that I am a selfless mother.

I wonder if the man who called my sister a lesbian for wearing sneakers to the lab feels entitled to complain to his romantic partner about dishes or his laundry. If his mother was a scientist, a teacher, a PTA official. I do not wonder how she felt in that moment, though. Hot eyes and tingling arms. The oxygen a little stubborn in a room that just shrank by eight square feet. Walls caving into her lips like saran wrap on inhales. At least, that's how I feel when a student makes a comment I'm not supposed to hear, when a woman says casually how *annoying* that a single mom brought her own mother to a Lamaze class, and how it directly affected her own life like a perma-swarm of mosquitoes at a campsite you've already paid for. How I let the saran wrap of that room coat my mouth and say nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing.

I took my infant to the lighthouse once, and a middle-aged man informed me that I should have had a hat on him underneath his hood and probably another jacket and another blanket because he would, surely, get sick. I smiled and passed him without explaining *The Baby Owner's Manual* says it is more likely for an infant to overheat than be too cold. Without telling him that he was rude. Without asking whether, like Amber Kinser's father, "it would be hard for [him] to accept that [a] mother works hard at being nurturing and caring, rather than doing so as naturally and effortlessly as, say, breathing, because then he would have to make sense of why [men] left all that hard work to [us]," while reserving the right to pass judgment on our personal failures.

I try to imagine what other words my culture has created that I can knit around myself when I'm twirling across my son's ice-sheen smile and slipping but gravitated toward him all the same. Selfless means that I'm the type of female human that would crumple into herself and hiccup her breath away if we ran out of diapers or white milk, and I wouldn't even own pearls because that would be an act of self-adornment. Women in my teaching institute feel exacerbated by binarism. They feel pressured into compartmentalizing life: be a mom at home, a professional teacher in the classroom. The qualitative research done by Laney et. Al. (2014) reveals that teacher-mothers commonly expressed motherhood as expansion of self: increased compassion, empathy, understanding. Then, why do these women feel themselves pressed back down again, dehydrated of their dynamism?

“Momism” was the cold war myth that if a mother was too cold she would forever emotionally debilitate her sons, but if she was too affectionate or if she refused to service her husband, well, it was probably because she had been abusive to the children instead, which would debilitate her sons. Nobody asked about daughters. Around a long, conference table, strong, professional women discuss the dishes waiting at home. The fact that they cannot compose academic work at home—because, obviously, they wind up scrubbing, bathing, soothing. I am self-conscious. I worry that they interpret my conspicuous silence as someone who has a messy house, someone too lazy to be everything to everyone, both at school and at home. I worry they will think that my youth means I'm sloppy, that I haven't matured into the cult of domesticity yet. I do not feel selfless at this table, which leaves the least desirable labels for me.

Out of the words that my culture has given to describe me, I can't find my fingerprints or the arc of my upper lip. I can't find my footing in the possible outcomes of the quiz that told me I am a selfless mother or in the way strangers felt entitled to my body when I was pregnant, to my son's body when he was small, to slick whatever labels they imagined onto my family. But when I take my son to the edge of the concrete path to Lake Michigan, surrounded on all sides by gasping glassy waves, I know that we are waves on rocks, sun on hands, and wind on the shallow dips underneath my shaking knuckles.

## **Current Double Binds of Motherhood**

During World War II sophisticated social infrastructures were miraculously erected to facilitate and encourage women to take up work that had previously been beyond their capabilities; however, immediately after the war, it was once again the epitome of poor motherhood to work outside the home (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p. 236). The 1940s also witnessed confusing dissonance between the hyper-permissive ideal from expert Dr. Spock and the warning of Philip Wylie against the perverse dangers of over-nurturant mothers called “momism” (Kinser, 2010, p. 65-666). Moving specifically into the iconic 1950s, the myth vastly differs from the statistical reality. The 1950s actually saw a rise in working married women, which combined with what Coontz describes as an anomaly of Victorian middle class selflessness and higher expectations in domestic chores, correlates with higher anxiety about parenting in stay-at-home mothers of the era than in working mothers (1994, pp. 161, 27, 164). Even the era from which the “traditional family” is derived did not actually reflect the construct in daily life. The dissonance between the reality and the media-perpetuated ideal reveals significant ramifications of these unrealistic expectations, as is evidenced in Betty Friedan’s landmark book *The Feminine Mystique*, where the potential for psychological damage was first discussed openly.

In addition to constant shifting of parameters for appropriate motherhood, the theory of biological determinism added fuel to the growing issues of maternal guilt and anxiety. Shari Thurer explains that “Motherhood—the way we perform mothering—is culturally derived. Each society has its own mythology, complete with rituals, beliefs, expectations, norms, and symbols” (1994, p.xv). This claim is supported by the historical

exploration of morphing expectations throughout time, running parallel to the shifts in culture itself. One such culturally-derived myth can be seen in the proud claim to mother's intuition: the mythical parenting superiority that women hold over men. Time and again, cultural refrains such as mother's intuition are repeated and reinforced. However, in addition to the fact that there is no scientific evidence to that effect, the myth can actually hold destructive power in the daily reality of mother's lives (Thurer, 1994, p. 23). The idea that mothers possess mystical power can evoke the concept of Neolithic women garnering respect and power. It may even make individuals feel powerful to invoke their right to mother's intuition. However, the problem therein is two-fold. First, calling what is actually a finely tuned base of parenting knowledge and experience an intuition negates all the hard work and intelligence that goes into successful motherhood. Susan J. Douglas and Merideth W. Michaels explain that when "Every day millions of women must organize their time and space . . . in a highly strategic fashion" under the assumption that no one can perform all parental duties quite as well as the mother, women are simultaneously trivialized and overworked (2004, p. 265). Second, if a mother is considered less intuitive to children's needs than another caretaker, this idea can be used as a measuring stick to mark her as a maternal failure—defective. Kinser explains that Hochschild's "second shift" of housework, which even working women take on predominately over male partners, combined with the myth of maternal intuition subtly oppresses women (2010, p. 113). Idealization of mothers as naturally better suited to child care and domesticity tethers women to both the expectation of performance, but also to the judgment in any domestic or parental shortcomings, which in turn tethers mothers to the "second shifts," or in cases of poor and unmarried women, third, fourth,



and fifth shifts in an attempt to keep up with maternal ideals only truly manageable for a privileged minority.

Claims of natural female domesticity also undermine the physical and emotional hard work and the consistency of it—the fact that it is never finished, that there could never be true success. Kinser explains that the myth of natural female domesticity is perpetuated by the fact that “it’s easier for people to think that women just *are* more nurturing . . . than it is to think that maybe we create [that belief]” (2010, p. 9). The 1980s buzz word “maternal thinking” coined by Ruddick demonstrates a parallel between the Victorian ideal of a Republican Mother, from whom housework naturally emanated, and the idea of mother’s intuition (p.108). These cobble the root structures of myths that proper motherhood necessitates proper cleanliness and domesticity. Not only does the myth of natural feminine domesticity unfairly burden mothers with extra physical labor, but it also erases the added physical and psychological struggle. Thurer explains that some aspects of gods like the Great Mother have remained in concepts such as mother earth and the stereotype that women naturally have a predisposition for intuition, a natural knowledge rather than intellect. Although this also seems beneficial, Thurer goes on to explain how this conflation leads to mom being held “responsible for every blessing and curse of existence” (p. 19). It’s easy to see how this seemingly benign image of all-powerful motherhood actually implies that poor and unwed mothers, with less financial, emotional, and physical support, are naturally less fit to mother, rather than acknowledging systemic forces that actively oppress.

Douglas and Michaels (2004) assert that the 1980s and 1990s bear witness to a resurgence of Phillip Wylie’s “momism” ideology, which they call a “new momism.”

Citing stereotypes from advertisements and dominant media representation, Douglas and Michaels feel that mothers in this era were also called upon to “foresee . . . every need and desire” while simultaneously being critiqued if their children lacked independence (2004, p. 17). Further perpetuating the assumptions, she claims, are the heavily publicized celebrity moms of the 1990s; rich, powerful, usually white women repeated a chorus claiming that motherhood was easy, completely fulfilling, and that it naturally scaled back their professional ambitions. The suggestion took a hard line in claiming that motherhood and a career could never coexist the way that fatherhood and career so pervasively do. The media-crafted narrative of celebrity moms clearly articulated that children are always more important than career, with no middle ground in acceptable femininity. That’s not to say that these wealthy, successful women were intentionally oppressive. The inclination to prove mother-worth is a familiar one to most mothers. However, by not acknowledging their severe privileges over the average mother, they set even more impossible standards, regardless.

Douglas and Michaels lament that “We are urged to be fun-loving, spontaneous, and relaxed, yet, at the same time, scared out of our minds that our kids could be killed at any moment,” (2004, p.3). Kinser pushes this idea forward, claiming that “women seemed to have only two options. They could funnel so much energy into motherwork that they scarcely had any left to build identity in other arenas. Or they could refuse to be defined exclusively in terms of motherhood and risk being labeled ‘bad mothers’” (2010, p. 121). In some workplaces, mothers can also be told that they should be more than *just* mothers if they intend to succeed, which can create dissonance. It can feel as though one is never truly successful in any one area of life, much less all of them. To completely

funnel all energy into childcare requires flexible or part-time work, which inherently tethers mothers who are not celebrities to less job security, fewer benefits, and just less money. In order to attempt financial security that might better provide for children, women must then sacrifice time and attention from children and domestic labor, which can lead to the label of unfit mother. In this way, “new momism” is just as much of a double bind as Wylie’s original “momism” because whether women financially or emotionally provide for their children according to cultural ideals, they will still fail in the other category.

However, for many women, the binds are tighter and more confusing than this simplistic situation. Many mothers are forced to work for survival, shamed for any claims to public assistance, shamed for working more than an acceptable amount, drained of the time and money to dote on children in the acceptable fashion (Kinser, 2010, p.201; Coontz, 1992, p. 140; Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p. 299). With these constraints in mind, public assistance is commonly deemed a personal failure in mainstream media, even though Stephanie Coontz explains that people of all classes have always relied on support beyond family (Douglas and Michales, 2004, p. 175; Coontz, 1992, p. 69). Extended support networks have historically included neighbors, churches, political networking with government officials and legislators. Even in the iconic 1950s suburbia, “independence” relied on federal housing loans, government subsidization of education, and approval of more mortgages than ever before (Coontz, 1992, pp. 61, 69-74, 77). In fact, when the idea of assistance is broadened to include the reality of dependence, Coontz explains that upper classes have always been more dependent on and beneficiaries of more support than lower class families; meanwhile, poor are

mythologized as inherently unfit (1992, pp. 82, 103). Based on these myths of family, single mothers and low-income mothers are stigmatized and sometimes publicly shamed for their limitations or use of assistance such as WIC and SNAP. Considering the double bind of “new momism,” less privileged mothers have an even more precarious situation than the simple either/or choice above. Many times there is no choice at all. The struggle is not to be a palatable mother, but to physically and psychologically keep the family alive. The oppression of this financial situation automatically deems low-income mothers as unfit.

Since most mothers on public assistance use it intermittently and usually for a year or less while finding grounding in jobs or schooling, claiming public assistance can feel like an exceptional trap (Schnitzer, 1998, pp. 156-58). One can stay within a harmful situation to avoid briefly making use of public funds set aside for exactly that position of need—thereby endangering the family. Alternately, one can take a chance on a better opportunity, a new housing situation, or even an educational venture, which necessitates use of public assistance, and feel stigmatized as “unfit” for that decision. Another double bind in which mothers become entangled regarding economic choices regards seeking economic independence. If mothers, especially those of deviant status such as single or low-income, choose a more difficult path of career, education, and family responsibilities combined, any unique struggle is “considered a result of *too much* independence,” focusing blame and shame back onto the mothers (Kinsler, 2010, p. 106).

Media-constructed “mommy wars,” the expectation to impose maternal guilt back onto oneself and the threat of maternal narcissism without maternal guilt, continually trap mothers in a state of psychological torment (Kinsler, 2010 p.127; Caplan, 1998, p.133;

Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.143). It's not just a set of cultural punishments to protect children, but a deliberate set of restrictions to homogenize and subordinate mothers. In fact, Caplan explains that ongoing cultural messages such as these can become internalized so much that they become self-fulfilling prophecies, the results of which are then used as evidence of the original claim that these mothers are unfit. The cultural trap explains a multitude of studies and findings. Considering unintentional bias in research questions, methods, measures, and observations, there are many potential psychological causes of maternal deviance cited in scientific studies, beyond inherent feminine flaw. "Bad mothering," therefore, is not actually representative of personal failure; but, it can be representative of the negative ramifications of cultural pressures and judgment.

Whether women perform "good" motherhood ideals properly or not, they are still performing. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity can be seen enforcing hegemony of motherhood. Motherhood identity is "*a stylized repetition of acts*" in daily life and media representation; it is one specific branch of gender performance (1990, p. 519). Just as Butler contests Beauvoir's claim that femininity as a social construct is actively and subjectively created by individual women, her idea of gender performativity can be specifically applied to ideology of "good" motherhood. Most mothers strive toward cultural ideals early on without much thought. This acting out of appropriate motherhood does create the cultural ideal of motherhood while creating the personal identity of this mother in alignment; however, the mother is usually not invoking a power to intentionally create the cultural narrative of motherhood. Just as "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished," those mothers who fail to do their maternal role right are regularly punished, as well. Butler offers the hope that "In its very character

as performative [gender] resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" (1990, p. 520). To extend this idea to performance of motherhood, more specifically, also suggests that subversive acts, although not always intentional, do offer hope to change the ideology of motherhood. Performing a new motherhood, a motherhood expatriate of traditional "good" motherhood, can change the very ideology itself.

## Bone Tarot

i.  
My son pulls a leaf off of someone else's bike  
and says, I need it to grow roots.

So we sketch predictions into anthills  
with narrow fingers and sticks:  
a sacred impossible mound unearthed  
like the place where I once planted  
him into the base of my spirit:  
I breathed, he breathed.

ii.  
At the autumn beach, I watch his limbs  
sketch coal colored sand deep into his pores,  
begging he find a heartbeat  
in soil, a voice in rocks  
sent out to sea with a prayer  
he does not yet know is a prayer.

iii.  
This earth ancient and warped  
its hands wrap  
around my every swatch of skin,

my throat hot with someone else's story  
gripping someone else's chords  
inside someone else's hands.

Grinning, so he doesn't remember  
how they had pressed against him  
fingers on my belly like a crystal ball

Grinning, before he learns to read palms  
because he will learn  
to read palms.

## Maternity Leave

It's a stiff wind on a Wednesday when I first feel it—the echoes of the mother-script across wavetops. Reflections. It's the lighthouse as a backdrop. My son small and nestled inside a stroller my extended family pooled together for. One of the five friends who gave me my crib-changing-table-combo snaps her iPhone at us. A deep breath and a hallelujah car ferry past the one stone path cutting Lake Michigan from shoreline to abyss. I could let the wind topple me if I wanted to feel weightless for just a second. What a beautiful photo that would make—arms arching like limp wings, face an absence, fingers like treble clefs. The rock bed below.

The wind huffs against our ears as we approach. Hair tuft cacophony, decrescendo. The muffled sun lets our eyes squint and water, unquestioned. The shushing waves let me pretend that I didn't hear the question, or the snapping. Or the strangers.

It's within the cavernous months of my not-school, of waitressing doubles and emotional paralysis that we take walks and make coffee dates just to gossip. It's the year of one hundred sonnets because I said that the world needed more sonnets, but really it was me. The absence. A reason to carry legal pads and snippets when my son was with his father. To pay attention. To not go numb, completely. It's the lisp of a ceramic sip, and ending every other sentence with, "So..."

Strange dogs shuffle by. A bristle of small stones echo as we emerge from the long, thin path to the outpouring of the lighthouse base. Waves slush on three and three quarter sides of the concrete slab. A stillness surrounded by motion. Deep, rattling breaths.



It's a stiff inquiry in the hollow between breezes that jars me: *My graduation is on the twenty-fifth.* And the steady, uninterrupted beats of waves after she asks: *So, what do you have planned?*

## When Aliens Knead You

The things that you hear after having a baby are always about looks. So after more than the inherited weight of pregnancy melts away, ribs poking your elbows, you will be called *beautiful!* and *uh-may-zing!* Never mind that your depletion was a fusion of the WIC diet waiting on student loans and child support and scrubbing the abandonment issues off your shoelaces. Never mind that your face is pale and your fingers shake and you get dizzy—a lot. Never mind. You look *beautiful*.

At the grocery store you read your oversized WIC vouchers like scripture. For the month of June 2011:

- Four cans of beans, refried or black
- The humiliating eyerolls from sixteen year old bag boys
- Two gallons of milk
- \$7 worth of produce, frozen and/or fresh
- The flush from somewhere below your neck, below the dip of the baby carrier into the cart, below your fingernails, behind your eye sockets, beneath the grinding of your organs against each other in protest
- 4 cans of juice, frozen, with *WIC Approved!* stickers
- Two boxes of cereal
- Nine glorious cans of formula, Similac sensitive

Your first trip to a bar postpartum, your son will be a howling silence during his father's weekend, and strange women will approach you and lift their shirts and tell you that you are *so lucky* you don't look like this. You are *so lucky* you don't have stretch marks, like an alien kneaded your stomach gently when you were most malleable, a

metaphysical massage with surreal implications. Co-workers will ask you behind the restaurant between their Marlbro green puffs to lift your shirt. And you will oblige them, the women, the co-waitresses, and they will say: *huh*.

## **Mona Lisa in the Park**

In the lift of a small car off a small curb,  
limbs dissemble and scramble, small arms  
splitting down the tendons to pull your parts

drafting new seams along sinew trails.  
You are protean, somewhere between scales  
and tufts. But not quite either yet.

Crafter of lean-to forts,  
this crater of voices and twigs in your scalp  
says that you are something small.

You are crumbs and dried coffee.  
Loose strands and dirt. The phase change  
from crystals to loose binds, to dissonance.

From a park bench, you steel-grate small palms  
to skylines glittering down fuse boxes, tilted  
toward the lakeshore quiet that waits to ignite.

## **Family Tree**

Number One proposed after only dating for three months. He had seen several variations of marriage and its malpractice and knew some paths to avoid. Number Two was 18 at the wedding. In their first summer, Number Two took her last dollars to bring a milkshake to Number One at work. She salvaged it from the floor when the Jeep hit a pothole, and he tried to smile through candy-coated gravel.

Number Two pretends she doesn't remember four children screeching like rusty nails against warped picture frames plus forty hour work weeks and setting the kitchen chairs up like a train set to get the floors mopped every weekend. She pretends it didn't wash all her grooves down to man the deep amethyst minivan alone most weeknights and Saturday soccer games.

Number One taught other people's teenagers about grease stains and double shifts—late nights and weekends—and about mediating devastation and a thick white envelope every other Friday. He knew something about pieces of family rattling around the minimum wage tile floor waiting to cut the bottoms of your feet.

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Number Three had a bagel thrown at her head at Wisconsin Lutheran College for being the only democrat on campus. Now she slices the heads clean off mice in a lab full of men who don't know she loves dark lager and football. She was officially christened into a glittering white lab coat and does not use the "F-word" as often as Number Four, though she subscribes to the magazine.

Number Four is a closet feminist, and her closet is the internet. She works for strangers with glowing screens, bold-fonted convictions, and a sleek interface. Number One pretends that his daughter has never published an article about porn or yoga.

Number Five pounds whiskey on bridges with surprisingly angelic introspection. He and Number Six finished high school a year late in a night class, together. They marched through the JFK gymnasium with strangers and suit coats and dreadlocks and roses. Years later, Number Six got married in the woods, and a tree crashed across the river at his vows.

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Number Five didn't know that Number Four pretended the older cousins hadn't banned her from being Cindy Crawford or Rachel Hunter in their attic fashion shows. He also didn't know she saw a shrink named Lynn in the tenth grade who wrote in her file, "Always cries," or steeled up her eyes to see Grandma on morphine.

Number Five didn't know that Number Four begged strangers to keep him from mowing down anymore Beast Light or blurred fast food signs or aberrant ditches. He didn't know she cried to strangers: "but what if it was him caked on Highway 310, instead of the collie?"

Number Five didn't know that Number Four *invented* getting drunk on bridges and the quiet part of a wedding. That she had peeled back labels in basements with red cups and twinkle lights. That she had made it a practice not to count.

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Number Two used to keep an aerosol hairspray by the wash machine to freeze daddy long legs. When Number Four got trapped in Chicago five months pregnant, it was Number Two that threatened to report MegaBus to the Better Business Bureau. At seven months pregnant, it was Number One that crossed two states to bring her home for Christmas, and drove back at thirty miles an hour through a snowstorm.

Number Four doesn't know the square root of pi, or how to bake an apple lattice, or where to put her hands when someone is staring. Number Four is afraid of scabs and concrete walls and the creaking wardrobe where her mother's peasant shirts have inhaled dust.

## Motherhood Mythology and the Softening of Deviance in Literature

Thwarted canonically by male voice and perspective, the stories of women by women are often buried and tainted by the culture into which they are born. This collection will consider works of memoir by Dr. Joanna S. Frye and the poetry of Sylvia Plath, although there are many other mother writers worth exploring. Frye deviates from traditional womanhood in *Biting the Moon: A Memoir of Feminism and Motherhood*, but she does so only in half-steps. Frye adapts a languid, long-form stream-of-consciousness style of writing with reflection and self-criticism in order to invoke cultural criticism. This book as an artifact of cultural expectations of motherhood, shows a traditional inclination to soften deviance to suit the hegemonic power in demonstrating some appropriate womanhood, and motherhood—even while challenging it.

The tonal softening used in Frye's memoir pays homage to Woolf and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), suggesting an intentional stylistic alignment. First of all, Frye uses layers of frames in time and space in order to access a story that requires cultural criticism, personal disclosure, and disclosing past abuse of her now-deceased ex-husband, father of her children. It is framed within the real-time writing of the book from 1998-2004, and runs parallel to her past narrative from 1968-1989. A stream-of-consciousness self-reflection opens most chapters, such as this: "Often I began the morning [trying to write this story] by standing by the window gazing out at the river that peeks between skyscrapers, and then looking down at the streets below. I test out phrases" (p. 63). In addition to the stylistic decisions, she infuses gentle, self-reflection into every chapter, as if she has to explain again and again why this story is worth telling, why she has a right to this narrative power. One passage even reflects on this psychological turmoil of her



autonomy: “In my dream, [my ex-husband] was a secret corpse, my responsibility; I was lost in a swamp of judgment” (p. 37). This disclosure aligns with Douglas and Michaels’ idea of “new momism:” internalizing judgments perceived from media representations, and maybe even literally received in individual opinions.

She uses soft diction and long, complex syntax to gloss over struggles and makes them beautiful and palatable, and a little less sharp: “Each day, as I try to wrench this story free from its constraints, I pace from my study, a New York room of my own, catching new refractions of light from my cherished crystal, a gift from Ron” (p. 26). Another place where this stylistic glazing over happens is in discussing the struggle to perform academic work as a mother: “The salvaged hour or two I spent afternoon working on the unfinished dissertation while Kara napped” (p. 51). That thought softens the fragmentation of her identity, it lilts with soft consonants and unstressed syllables. It sounds and feels like a hazy dream, as does most of the book. The long-form allows for ample room to move back and forth between present and past in a dream-like state, supported by the gentle self-reflection and stream-of-consciousness style. There is reference to fragmentation, but the entire book feels smoothly intertwined.

There is also ample evidence of Frye softening the content of her memoir under the pressure of “new momism” and cultural expectations of femininity. She expresses feeling confined by public judgment and constant anxiety over what she *should* be thinking, feeling, and doing as the disparate individuals of Dr. Frye, professor, and Joanna Frye, mother in several poignant, but muffled, instances. Describing her exodus from her emotionally abusive first marriage, for example, Frye is muting and mocking her tendency to tell it as her “Mythic Self.” This section is muted in the frame of “I see

myself,” which distances perception from reality and suggests her own distance from narrative authority. She explains “as the protagonist of the tale, I unite protective maternity and assertive independence,” clearly mocking and aligning this personal narrative with mythological grandeur (p. 89). All of this builds up to a place where she allows herself to say: “I *am* strong on behalf of my daughters,” but it is quickly qualified with, “but my strength cannot be mythic except in my own imagination” (p. 89). Although it is hardly perceptible, this passage actually critiques what Sheri Thurer identifies as a Great Mother stereotype that requires women live up to goddess-like perfection, which holds her “responsible for every blessing and curse of existence” (p. 19). She was strong. She was not a goddess. And, years later Frye is still analyzing whether that was enough, an artifact demonstrative of lasting psychological damage of internalized motherhood myths.

She more explicitly critiques these cultural constraints of ideal motherhood and the necessary maternal guilt in several places. For instance, she identifies the “Larger-than-life-mother” she attempted to be, including “Single parent holiday fervor” that tries to over-compensate for a “broken” family (pp. 94, 102). Later on in the book, she identifies an ongoing attempt to “struggle against so many cultural assumptions about motherhood” (p. 217). These small confessions combine the crushing mythologies of perfect motherhood: myth of the all-powerful Great Mother, the potentially perverse mother of Wylie’s “momism” that needs to give children space, the perky and hyper-domestic 1950s ideal, the icon of “new momism” who might work a little bit, but always makes up for it later. Perhaps the unnamable nature of these mythological creatures inhibits Frye from identifying their mark on her work. Just as women who actually fit the

1950s sitcom mom ideal in the 50s, those who deeply bore the ideological constraints of “good” motherhood, suffered greater stress and mental illness than mothers who worked, Frye’s reflection works as a literary artifact of mental and emotional duress due to imposition of cultural ideals onto actual mother psychology.

## **The Great Mother**

Find god in the earth beneath sick trees,  
beneath thin-webs,  
and a white-hot moon.

Find her crouched and dusty,  
speckled, observant,  
and cradling the forest.

Find her fingers in your hair  
while you wander.

Find her waiting, stirring  
leaves into her webbed crown  
like a potion.

But, find her.

## **The Adventure of the Great Shoe-Gill**

There is something about the guilt that surrounds the fact that most days I can't function before coffee, before it takes hold in the swerving veins of my poorly circulated fingers, the fingers that ran smeared with my own blood in labor because the nurses could not find a vein, the fingers that twitched at the postpartum carpal tunnel from mommy-multitasking, the fingers that fasten car seats and sweep the bangs from small blue eyes, that makes me determined to immerse my family in the raw guts of nature. Immediately. Guilt about the fact that I can't always speak my son's language, and I'm afraid of the words he doesn't mean. About the fact that I'm afraid that every college degree for which we have sacrificed is useless. Selfish. Anxiety about my son's split identity teetering over the Wisconsin-Michigan border, teetering on my ability to maintain mature interactions with someone that I do not respect. I'm etchasketch shaking the skyline behind me, grounding my feet into the dash, and practicing 7-4-3 breathing techniques that I use on the first day of teaching each semester. I'm told that it's the equivalent of a Xanax or an Ambien, but it feels like clunky heaving. Like my perception of my parenting attempts.

Lost in the Hiawatha forest, my partner and I snap like synapses while my small son beams lasers from fingertop to fingertop, singing: "I saw a ninja, ninja. I saw a ninja, ninja. I saw a ninja, ninja." Across my lap, sprawl three different maps whose sparse spider leg roads leave miles blank. Unmapped. Each road we pass has been labelled with three different numbers, each of which appear on none of the maps, and there is something about the flipping back and forth of paper, and the gentle chorus that buoys it: "I saw a ninja, ninja. I saw a ninja, ninja." Something about the small frame slumping into his seat before we emerge back onto Highway 28. Something about the wind across

his wispy hair, his chin lolling across a balled fist. Something about gravity, and the fact that I cannot always speak his language that makes me feel guilty that I cannot make the maps release their secrets.

It takes an hour to traverse a few sparse miles, and my family is desperate to press sandals to dirt. Our first two campgrounds, we halo in a line of canoe and kayak strapped vehicles and RVs swarming to any available site—to no avail. It takes hours to find a site, and I want to say that I have brought my son into the wilderness to commune with nature, to hike and swim in Lake Superior, to make transient friends, to learn to ride his bike. I do hold out hope for those accomplishments, but in reality I have come here from the depths of selfishness; I have come here to lure my friends away from their rock bands, their social media, and their crisis line shifts to remind me of home in the midst of chaos. I have come to lure myself away from screens, from the impending semester, and the syllabus I have yet to finalize. This trip is my life line, both to harness my most genuine self, to be present in the exact moment, on the exact rock at the top of a scenic overlook screened by pine trees and to be present in conversations with my son that make him feel as if he is the only human on earth that I want to talk to. And it's ok to need a lifeline. Something grounding. A map.

I have planned this trip for months, which begs the question of why I didn't reserve a site rather than playing roulette with our locale. Eventually we wash up onto an open site at Wide Waters—which was buried in one of my maps. My partner tethers a tarp fort between two trees where my son watches us unfurl sandwiches in the rain. Carrying the canoe directly overhead, my son chatters along behind until he drops behind and drops his drawers along the main camp road.

That night, as my son crafts shadow puppets across his canvas sky, I tell him I will be right outside. He gives me a crinkle-cut dimpled-smile and nods, the light teetering across my face. We are waiting for our friends to arrive late into the night: four adults and one fifteen month old. Back at the fire, I worry that my academics, my ambitions, my son, and the locking and falling of my chest have let the rope run out too far from the women who have made me. I feel the pull of myself in different directions, stretched out across the pins of disparate stars like rubber band art pulling my corners lightyears in every direction. Even in the rustic moonlight, I can feel like a failure in small, prickling ways. Lifting and resting my heel in a rugged ballet flat, dirt chips away at my ankles. Studying the moon with my partner, I worry.

My friends also get lost in the forest, on the roads with six names and no maps to a rock-opera anthem. When I hear a familiar voice call my name from a slow-rolling SUV, my son a rumbling silence in the distance, I take my godson into my arms while his parents set up camp with headlamps twittering across the ground. He laughs every time his father passes, and then he sleeps. And on my single air mattress, I feel guilty that I cannot make the maps reveal their secrets. But, we are a forest village. All hands focused on caring. A commune, if only for a day.

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My son has recently developed and refined a love for spider hunting that has been met with gently contoured cringe-smiles and owl-eyed cheers. So, as we flipped the baby blue canoe off its nestled tree-line koozie, I invited him to clear the bow of bugs for us: an honored position since he frequently sits at my feet there in the front. Here's the not-so-simple reality of outdoors-ing with a small child. It's slow. It seems more like a series

of detours than an actual journey. And fine, maybe it would be more impressive to log a canoe trip that looks like a pinball trajectory mapped across my gazetteer pages, one that is measured in miles and humble-bragged across social media apps with GPS tracking: “#150miles today! #blessed!” Maybe (probably) you would call my 5 mile swing in either direction from the dock just south of the Indian River pretty pointless to experience, much less write about. But maybe it’s also pointless to expect parents to somehow splice their lives down the middle: self/parent; exciting/responsible; active/passive. Be that as it may, there is a heroic journey inside every craigslist-based 1980s canoe purchase, and this is mine.

I like to think of life as a #singlemom as an active Oulipo composition. From getting to a dentist appointment to homework sessions to teaching, from biking to attending an actual yoga class with grown-up humans, from last-minute professional development sessions and mandatory evening meetings to deciding to walk to the park: every moment is constrained both naturally and artificially. The beauty emerges from the gentle finesse of camouflaging the constraints, blending them into the natural cadence of a word, a phrase, an experience. Blending them so that my son does not see the wires I pluck at premeditated moments, only the seamless crescendo of a sun-soaked Friday boat ride. Blending the purple under my zombie-eyes with the red frames of my glasses so that classmates do not feel awkwardly lodged between pity and gossip mid-semester.

Once our baby blue canoe is inside the river, we head downstream through a series of lulling hidden water around downed trees. The boys are sitting behind me: my partner on the rear seat luring the fishing poles, my son on the ground in between us shivering with excitement. After confessing that I truly cannot help my son with his reel,



definitely not with a worm, and for sure I cannot touch a fish, I loll my paddle on either side of the boat attempting to keep us still. As adult assigned to stability with un-tangled lines, my son says to me: “You’re getting *everything* in my eyes, mama.” After throwing back a few baby blue gills, I am getting the hang of keeping us in one general area. And that is when we meet him. My son reels hard against a full-size blue gill that almost took his Iron Man rod back into the river. Bringing him into the boat—at about a length of four or five inches—my partner lays our new friend behind his seat. Every time he flops, my son giggles inconsolably, until finally, he flops straight into a vacant Sanuk. After my partner calls him our shoe gill, my son squeals its name at every flop until he succumbs to stillness: “Do you hear the shoe-gill, mama? Guys, guys, it’s a SHOE-gill!”

Turning back toward whence we came, an impossible wind stagnates our paddles. My son sips from my purple Powerade and leans the boat, swatting *everything* away from his eyes, and the canoe lodges dead-center on a stump. We spin in circles for a while. My son says, “Umm, the Blue Blue Baby is stuck. We’re going in circles now.” And, lest we mistake him for a more boring child, “Poison gravy” – meaning to call me Poison Ivy, the villain from *Batman and Robin*, “Poison gravy, maybe you can use your plants to save us,” as he swirls his small fingers through some river weeds. Once successfully dislodged, we take Blue Blue Baby and the shoe gill upstream through the oppressively, predictably beautiful and tepid Indian River. It has a steady percussion of wildlife echoes and lake flies nosediving at our skin, the sun perfectly slanted. It feels so actively peaceful within my pre-fatigued arms that I might have just tipped over the boat to see it live and move. But I didn’t.

From behind a veil of crippling self-doubt and general awkwardness, I always urge my son to be socially fearless, empathetic, and kind. Back at the boat launch, we divide: my partner shores up the canoe and tucks the shoe gill into his tackle to carry back to our site while I supervise the last moments of water-based semi-freedom. A boy who is maybe seven or eight years old swims in his underwear. He says to his uncle, “Some people can’t afford a swim suit, right? But all that matters is they’re having fun, right?” His uncle says, “It doesn’t matter. Just stop worrying about it. They look just like swim trunks. Just stop calling them your undies. Call them your swim trunks, and it doesn’t matter.” I try to balance my urge to smile at him encouragingly and to avoid eye contact so that it doesn't seem like I'm judging them. I think that I seem crazy instead.

An excess of peaceful river surges makes me think that I am, maybe, half-crazy, instead.

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Camping, we easily spend as much time static as in motion, and that’s the general outcome of imposing the constraints of responsibility, compassion, and patience necessary to parent onto travel plans. It would be completely arbitrary to gauge whether this reality adds or detracts, objectively, from the experience of, say, a canoeing or camping trip. So rather than attempt to qualitatively rank and assess the situation, I compiled some descriptive realities.

Travelling without my son—camping, canoeing, walking, biking—is faster, usually more efficient, and allows more flexibility. I can write, read, and socialize with humans my own age, size, or vocabulary level, and those things are nice. When I travel with my son—camping, canoeing, walking, biking—it’s fragmented, surprising, and it

allows me to buffer the experiences through the lens of motherhood. Through my son's questions and observations, through my own worrying and wondering. And, that's nice, too. But only in one of those scenarios is it almost socially acceptable to sing the sesame street theme song and call each other super hero names, and the gravity of that reality is immeasurable.

With our gang in tow, we drive to Pictured Rocks for a day hike – my social anxiety aimed at meeting the adventurous needs of our non-parental companions who had intended to backwoods camp. Seeing his small friend conveniently packed into a backpack, my son swears that his legs don't work and he must be carried. So obviously I take the last half mile of the first stretch with thirty pounds on my narrow shoulders. We emerge at Miner's Beach, our actual intended destination and meet some surprises.

As expected, it doesn't really seem to matter much where you begin in Pictured Rocks; it's all pretty incredible, as far as I can tell. However, as a first-time visitor to the Miner's Beach with a crew of Lake Michigan natives in a mild feud over the actual greatest lake, I guess it never really clicked how much Lake Superior can look like an ocean. The sand is stark white and hot, the water crystal clear cerulean tinted, and yes, frigid. The non-parental units of our voyage tear off their outer garments and wade into the water, the other parents set up a small camp for the infant and take turns applying sunscreen to his pale skin and wading into the waves. My son is intimidated by the waves, but the village takes turns on child-supervision duty before heading back to the trucks that might return us to our campsite. My partner shoulders my son the entire hike back, and once at the site, we both creak in disappointment of our bodies under the weight of his tiny limbs.

The non-parental units of our group hammock sleep—dangled above and beyond our familial canvas domes, free-hanging and separate with a tarp shielding them from the impending rain. In the morning, the hammockers sleep through the thunderstorm clean-up of over-protective, anxious parental-type units, emerging to roll up the hammock as the downpour slows to a drizzle, and I wonder what it might be like if we were all non-parental units or even if we were all parental-units, and what might the recreation of this trip look like in ten years, or twenty. What will our families and ambitions, our careers and looming student debts look like? Where might our bodies, our map-reading, our adventuring skills, and our reproductive organs lead, and what might be left behind? Reflecting on memories of my own childhood camping-ventures, I remember the time my father woke up without a shirt and when I asked where it went, he told me firmly and squarely, that he had burned it. As my mother laughed from the picnic table, I asked why he had burned his shirt; for the first time he seemed wobbled by this line of questioning, and explained: “It was very old, and we were running out of fire wood last night. And Bob burned his.” —at which point, I must have been satisfied.

Although there were no shirt-burnings or raucous fire-antics, nor do I anticipate any in the future, I do wonder what will cake around the outskirts of my son’s memory like a thin film. I wonder, if this summer were a word, what are its connotations, its after tastes. What sits in our sole like a slimy shoe-gill, flopping now and then, before lying completely still.

## In the Great Pando Forest

- I. There's a cataclysm  
beneath root-feet  
muscling nature,  
one foot after one foot  
clenching earth  
in warped toes,  
and what it means  
to live nine-thousand  
eight hundred  
burials  
and resurrections  
every day  
that you are here.
- II. This road burned into creases of bent arms—where bulbs  
of weight press down too long with hands at ten and two  
I trace it up and down my arms, this road along book spines, horizons, and the  
wrinkle in the waitress' cheek who knows us in Menominee  
on the state border, the quivering split down your home like a chasm,  
a fault line, a fault between your me and your father.
- III. I trace this migratory pattern  
until it splits, rests open  
on its haunches, and squeals.
- I trace this migratory pattern,  
our pattern, across my skin,  
my dirt, my scalp, the halo of my family in photos.  
I trace it on a map until it burrows down into earth  
like a poison-oak-sear bearing down
- upon the potential energy of scars  
while he is gone,  
tethered underground.

## **With Strangers Like These**

December 12

I sit at the bar after work at the dawn of my third trimester. Glossy oak rolls beneath my elbows. I'm shuffling singles and rotating my dangling ankles. I don't try to join in the cacophony of party stories that echo off to my left where the other waitresses have already cashed out and are sharing an order of calamari. I smile when they ask if they look three months pregnant from eating too much. I lie when they ask if my back hurts, my feet. I smile when they make jokes about vegetarians. Mostly, though, I do not say anything at all. Glossy oak beneath my elbows.

"Who's going to be in the delivery room with you?" my boss, Jane, asks. I've learned in the three months I've worked here that she is anything but subtle, and I start to think that's the thing about strangers or almost-strangers, and usually about bosses.

I say his name—my son's father—and peel down singles to tip out the expo, the bartender, the busser, the hostess, "and my mom, too."

"Do you really want your mom there? In the room with you?" Jane asks while polishing wine glasses with the bartender. A small white rag buffing haloes on stems. "You should really have someone else there. Someone supportive." I cringe.

Jane goes on, "Someone here."

In Victorian times, a wealthy father could abuse and neglect wife and children without losing custody. American coverture was dwindling, but the ideology behind women as subsets of the husband's legal identity persisted. Single mothers were often sent to insane asylums. I don't know how to wear that title yet—scraping, I make a

scarlet letter out of red duct tape for Halloween, a nest of hair ties to hold my pre-pregnancy jeans up.

At the glossy oak bar, I do not look up from my make believe counting as I cycle through my cash tips over and over again. I don't tell Jane that I've quit expectations cold turkey, and really, I'm not her responsibility.

"What if he doesn't get here in time?" she goes on talking, I go on counting, the smooth wisp of the illuminati pyramid flitting on my fingerpads. "I mean, it's five hours. You should take a Lamaze class, too. He can't be here for that."

"There's one at Mercy," I say. My OB recommends it. She's kind, and sometimes I lie to her questions because her hair is so perfect.

"You should take a Lamaze class with Joy." Jane says this with the emphasis of an imperative.

Cady Stanton and some two thousand supporters protested for equal custodial rights between mothers and fathers in 1869. By the twentieth century, women could have custodial rights in 9 states—with a proper record of morality, purity. No sexual deviance. No deviance.

Joy insists that I let her come to Lamaze with me. She insists she has time between three jobs and getting ready for her wedding and law school. She insists there is nothing she would rather do. We are both wearing short-sleeved black tee shirts and dress slacks. The apron covers the gap where my pants cannot clasp. Joy slides her apron coolly across the light oak bar. She takes my number. She will come to Lamaze.

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December 5

Jane had cornered me in dry storage before the second half of my split shift:

“Have you called your mother yet?”

“No, I slept.” I shuffled my jacket onto a hook that already had three jackets on it. It slipped off a few times, but I finally got it to stick and turned around.

“Call your mother.”

“I will, I just—“

“Call your mother. Today. After work.” That quiet. A couple girls squealed past us. Earlier that morning I dutifully informed Jane that I had received a phone call from the woman who had slept with my boyfriend. Her name was Lily. I said I was doing the best I could. I told her everything was going to be fine.

“Are you OK?”

Everything was going to be fine.

“Yeah.”

According to Judith Arcana, the “idealized mother is a woman who is boundlessly giving and endlessly available . . . The idealized father is practically invisible . . . scarcely present, to his son his presence becomes miraculous and precious.” Judith was a Jane. She and a secret pack of Chicago women performed over eleven thousand abortions before its legalization. She was the anti-coat hanger. I could never be a Jane. I’m afraid of getting arrested, that any deviance might remove my son from me. Even when we are only one body. I’m afraid of blood and other people’s bodies. But Joy, she could have



been a Jane. She worked at Planned Parenthood afternoons she was not at the restaurant. She helped poor, hurting young women. Basically, strangers. She was going to be a lawyer. I could see her, the woman whose slacks always close, whose hair does not frizz, on some stone staircase somewhere walking her crying client to the car. I could see her winning.

There was a flurry of twenty year olds in black shirts and jingling champagne flutes overhead as we prepped the back server station. A girl I don't like but don't exactly not-like got an internship with *Cosmo*. That, and she met a boy at a wedding. I didn't have much to add to either discovery and she'd never actually spoken to me before, so I stocked napkins and filled water pitchers. I didn't tell anyone about the phone call. I didn't tell them I had dumped my son's father. I didn't tell them that when Lily called to tell me what he had done to us she was crying—I was not. I just let the secrets settle on my fingers as I mixed a ginger ale.

I did cry on the bus, though. And in the library, and on the walk from the library to the English-Philosophy Building. I did cry after a stranger stood and insisted I take his place at the library computer, and every time the cashiers asked to carry my bags from the Hy-Vee. Sizzling white lights pluming on my shoulder blades. I cried when my mother begged me to come have my baby at home. I cried when I told her, "No," although I aimed it away from the phone. And, I cried when a boy from my Cleopatra acting group shared his rap talents with me—and didn't ask anything about my pregnancy at all.

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February, March, April

I will not text Joy when it is almost time for Lamaze to start and I am alone. Every other Monday of the next two months, I will sit in a seventies-themed hospital basement and think that she is probably not coming and that's ok. The Berber is burnt orange. The chairs scooped and pale. It's not a big deal. It's not her job. And every other Monday night for the next two months, she will bluster in at two minutes 'til and tell me to breathe when they put up slides about caesarean.

It's estimated that one hundred to one hundred twenty-five thousand children are kidnapped by a non-custodial parent every year. In a study of North American parents from 1960-1981, 0% of women were reported to have "engaged in brainwashing campaigns" of the children, as opposed to 57% of men in the study. 62% of men abused their wives after a split, 37% kidnapped their children, and 67% reported financial motives for seeking custody. The size of the study is too small, but I'm defensive of experiences, stories in sealed rooms. When my son's father comes to Iowa City the week of my due date, I will show him the online child support calculator that estimates he will be ordered to pay \$875 a month, based on our income discrepancies. I will say I don't want to go to court and ask for \$500 a month. He will laugh and offer to pay \$400, no more. We will be sitting on two, squat wooden chairs at a library desktop. It will smell like dust and strangers. I will tell him I do not want to go to court.

When my roommate insists I start timing my contractions and text her, Joy will answer immediately and be over in minutes. I will not want to be a bother, but she will

drive us to the hospital anyway in a small, blue car. When they have to give me oxygen, I will tell her I think that the nurses hate me for screaming. Because I can't breathe. For gaining more than the recommended weight. For saying I want a margarita after he is born. She will tell me that's crazy, and I won't tell her that's exactly what I'm afraid of.

## **Charcoal, of (prepositional phrase)**

In the sketchbook chart of us,  
I catalog the root system  
like a tangle of eighth notes  
on thin, black lines  
our falsetto grief settling like haloes.

The triplet note-swinging of our knees  
slams heavy  
on damp, taut chords,  
the lingering soprano looped above  
through gold teeth, but no strings.

In the sketchbook chart of us, this house  
droops melting in my cryogenic gums,  
this ground, the beating of knuckles to tin  
and the thin, black wires between our toes.

## **Robot Doctor**

“Adam’s hands are dirty, mumma,” my son explains as he packs blue Play-Do under his fingernails. “Always dirty.” On my first date with Adam, I didn’t know that scrubbing the grease stains out of a mechanic’s hands began with a ritual sacrifice of fingernails and the flesh of the tips over a small bowl sink. I didn’t know that the closest shade to human was achieved by hand-washing his mother’s dishes, or that someday he would get to meet my son.

“I hate Jimmy,” my son goes on, “he’s grumpy at school, and he’s not my friend. I hate him. I jus—hate him.”

He has asked me to conjure an alligator out of green lumps, and I’m mystified by whether you’re supposed to take one lump and squeeze out all the small limbs or curl the limbs up out of separate chunks and then attach them. Do I hold us up—one chunk of the dough—to mold a feeble apartment out of waitress tips in my hometown? Or, do I grasp at straws of Graduate School, my son’s family scraps across two states, cobbling our futures like separate chunks of clay? They are always falling apart at the seams. I pretend it isn’t seizing every inch of me up to know that I will try something as hard as I can and still fail. I pretend that it’s okay with me if I make something with my own hands that no one can decipher. I pretend that visual art doesn’t feel like forging hieroglyphics in my too-white hands. I pretend that I can put us back in the can so we don’t dry out and crack.

“Did he make you sad?”

“Yeah, he’s so grumpy en’ he’s not my friend. He gets time out for hitting.”

“You don’t have to like everyone,” I tell him as I make the impromptu decision that every alligator in my dining room will have a tightly sealed jaw because I don’t know how to add teeth, or subtract them. “But, you should be nice anyway.”

“Ugh, mumma—I’m just too grumpy to play.” He trust-falls with splayed arms onto our couch.

I let him go and smash the wads of green back into one palm. I divide it up and screw the rolled up limbs into a squat base. I dangle it in front of my son’s horizontal face where he is taking a break.

“Bobot! Thank you, mumma!”

As he re-enacts the climax of *Toy Story 2*, I am commissioned to buzz and slick the falling limbs back onto their native sockets with the whirring voice of a robot doctor. After he tells me three times that there are no more mumma's in the bobot space ship, I relent to washing tomatoes in the kitchen and peeling back the layers of dirty dishes from our stainless steel sink.

## Further Maternal Divergence

Sylvia Plath, although writing decades before Frye's struggles, diverges further from traditional form and content in much of her confessional poetry exploring depression and the cultural pressures of motherhood in an explicit and raw manner in the collection *Ariel*. The content of Plath's motherhood poems explicitly identifies and indicts motherhood mythologies. In the poems explored, Plath shows the damage of biological essentialism and anxiety over inability to conform to "good" motherhood myths. She extensively dissects the detriment that imposition of the "good" motherhood ideals can have on mental health of mothers who diverge from that ideal. It operates as one artifact worth significant examination, not only because it shows the effect of narrow maternal expectations on a wildly subversive mother, but also because they challenge maternal ideals; by trailblazing confessional poetry, Plath also bravely set herself forth as a transgressor of proper femininity and a transgressor of proper literature in a way that has not yet been normalized or acceptable on either front. Formally, Plath uses hideous and jarring imagery, white space, and the thick oppressive fog created by strings of stressed syllables to enact transgressive motherhood experiences. These formal decisions are brazen and blunt; they directly state and demonstrate the all-consuming devastation of maternal expectations some mothers feel. Unlike the softened, gentle, languid experience of reading Woolf or Frye, Plath cuts straight to the point with jarring imagery, metaphor, and rhythm.

The blunt description of maternal duties in "Morning Song" aligns with a cultural critique of the warped Victorian roots of the 1950s maternal ideals (Coontz, 1994, p. 161). Morbid descriptions such as the child's "moth-breath" and the infant's "mouth opens

clean as a cat's" create a beastly distance from the child. It's not just a slight dislike, but an other, an alien-ness, a distance. This chasm may also be detected in earlier lines that describe the setting of her home "In a drafty museum, your nakedness / Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls." The blank slate demeanor of the narrator mother and infant represent Victorian ideas of motherhood when women were believed to be sexless and frigid. This cool distance demonstrates the connection that Coontz made between Victorian motherhood ideals and the 1950s myth of traditional motherhood; and, it suggests that Plath made this connection, too.

The rhythmic decisions in "Morning Song" outline another aspect of the buried truth regarding 1950s expectations of "good" motherhood as Plath would have felt them during her domestic years: anxiety and stress under the cultural ideals of maternal domesticity. Heavy stresses like the "fat gold watch" of conception, "flat pink roses," of the infant's breath, and "from bed cow-heavy" in regards to waking with an infant throughout the night explore the weight of these maternal duties. By illustrating the suffocating weight of these duties portrayed as natural and feminine according to the 1950s ideal of biological essentialism, Plath is directly transgressing appropriate motherhood.

"The Arrival of the Bee Box" illustrates the tensions of disdain for domesticity against anxiety over appropriate motherhood. She does this using the bee box as a metaphor for domesticity, bees as a metaphor for children, and the beekeeper as a metaphor for the mother character. The bee box represents the imposed order of domesticity, which she "ordered" through marriage, which she shows by calling it a "clean, wood box," "square as a chair," "locked," with "no windows," "no exit." All of



these descriptions insinuate constraint and order that mimics the ideal order of 1950s domesticity. The steady strophic structure of five line stanzas remains orderly until the final line, with a clear Volta at stanza five that shifts from focus on the bee box toward the bee keeper.

Plath's exploration of the ideal order imposed on mothers by cultural ideals of cleanliness and organization bumps up against the internal conflict that many women experienced. Images of the box as a "coffin," "dangerous" and "swarmy," with "black on black angrily clambering" and the "box of maniacs" create the feeling of anxious, uncontrollable movement and sound. Use of short vowel assonance in strings emphasizes the buzzing. Phrases such as "din in it," "There is only a little grid, no exit," and "unintelligible syllables" emphasize the chaos and disorder of motherhood, as well as the potentially dangerous nature of children using short "I" sounds to speed up the lines. As earlier historical analysis showed, Plath actually mirrors the effect of Victorian middle class selflessness and higher expectations in domestic chores culturally implemented the 1950s, which led to a correlation with higher anxiety about parenting in stay-at-home mothers of the era than in working mothers (Thurer, 1994, p. 161, 27, 164).

The Volta at stanza five markedly shifts from exploring the nature of the box, domesticity and motherhood, into development of the narrator's character. Where previously the narrator only existed in her examination of the box, such as "I ordered this, this clean wood box" and "I have to live with it overnight," stanza five shifts toward exploration of the narrator's personhood. "I am not a Caesar. / I have simply ordered a box of maniacs." She goes on to assume power and authority; the box, domesticity and children, exists in relation to the mother narrator: "I need feed them nothing, I am the

owner.” Furthermore, her “moon suit” in stanza seven represents feeling alien or like an invader around the bee box of domesticity and the “funeral veil” description of the bee keeping helmet calls upon connotations of death and grief.

Once the onus has shifted, Plath dives into exploration of maternal anxiety. The narrator says, “I wonder if they would forget me / If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree” and “I am no source of honey,” expressing the feelings of lacking what the bees want and need. Her final line of stanza seven: “Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free” suggests that the narrator believes the children are better off without her, forgetting her. It’s the ultimate maternal guilt and feelings of failure.

One of the most bluntly transgressive poems in *Ariel*, “The Edge” describes the mental and psychological terror of postpartum depression. Describing a mother character who has committed suicide, presumably with her murdered babies postpartum, Plath creates the aesthetic of an ancient Greek sculpture or painting:

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,”

Everything is beautiful, distilled, gently described. Even the presumed victims of infanticide are angelic and artistic: “Each dead child coiled, a white serpent.” A few lines further down “She has folded / Them back into her body as petals.” The disconnect between gruesomeness of an actual infanticide-suicide act and the serene beauty sealed over the top of it in this poem demonstrate the mental state during postpartum depression. The final couplet of the mother having lived in mourning clothes may also be a metaphor for postpartum depression: “She is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks cackle and drag.”

Again, the rhythmic choices made in “Edge” demonstrate the order imposed on this experience. In this case of postpartum depression, the orderly imposition of couplets creates a steady and measured shape on the page and pacing of the poem itself. On a line level, extensive use of strings of unstressed syllables creates the rhythmic hollowing of PPD into the serene, artistic image of death. For instance, “The woman is perfected” holds three unstressed syllables right in the middle. This creates a quicker, gentler rhythm that feels more distilled than a choppy heavily stressed string would. A similar effect is seen in the middle of “The illusion of a Greek necessity” and “The moon has nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone.” None of these examples have a single trochee or any stressed syllables in a row, but also have at least one string of three unstressed syllables giving that distilled, gentle aura of a beautiful, classic painting.

The other rhythmic decisions demonstrate the undercurrent of chaos the poem and its structure are trying to suppress. This can be seen in the moments of actual violence. For instance, the first stacking of stressed syllables occurs at “dead, child, coiled.” A few more examples occur at “sweet, deep throats of the night flower” and at the final image where “Her blacks crackle.” The moments that reference the gruesome reality halt the gently, flitting rhythm of lesser-stressed lines with harsh stresses that force the voice to slow and feel the sharpness of the reality. The way these rhythmic decisions press up against each other demonstrates the tension between the imposed order of PPD logic and the underlying chaos of the illness and defective motherhood. This brave representation of motherhood deviance starkly and thoroughly demonstrates a radical transgression of appropriate motherhood ideals of the 1950s, and still today. As such, this poem is an

important artifact of the undercurrent pushing against the imposed order of “good” motherhood ideals.

Douglas and Michaels lament in the introduction to their work that “We have to move between these riptides on a daily basis” in order to be successful at work and as mothers (p. 12). Factor in the millions of different forces and realities in a family, and these riptides grow vicious at times. At other times, they fall silent aside from the winds needed to fuel them. Considering preceding literary representations of motherhood in nonfiction and poetry made me want to more accurately, more viscerally, more dynamically demonstrate these riptides because the hardest part of the experience is being told that the experience is not real. However, recognizing the literary works of Frye and Plath as artifacts of a specific cultural moment performing specific maternal identities also leads this project to the awareness that it cannot follow the same footsteps in either form or content of previous writers. This is a performance of this motherhood in this moment doing these very acts as they are written.

## When He Tells You, *It's Secrets*

Wear the fingernail grooves latched  
into collarbone scoops  
like they matter. Like skeleton key holes  
or skeletons.  
Like the fine black teeth  
of twisted combs. Wear them gnarled  
and glossy. Matte gold script worn free.

When he tells you, *it's secrets*  
hold that breath like heartburn  
inside your five stone walls.  
Hold that hand to rock,  
and say it's dying  
stars like echoes, my hair brittle  
in the moon. Tell me sixteen ways  
to walk across phone wires.  
To scratch niceties into our teeth  
like static  
like the shallow heels of knit mittens.  
Like scabs.  
To imprint.  
On snowmen.

When he tells you  
the secrets,  
you imprint.  
Like snowmen. Like skeletons.  
Like the fine worn lines on his  
grandmother's kind face.  
Like you know  
how to hold warm snow  
or keep form.

## **Cowboys and Indians**

When I come to pick my son up from grandma and grandpa after a night class, my son's three-year-old elbows are burrowed into his papa's shoulders, his chin to the crown of Papa's head. The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly is on. My father says it is his favorite movie of all time, that it's a classic, and as I close the front door behind me, I say: I know. After all, I too grew up watching Westerns with my father, admiring the stoicism and integrity he pointed out. "I want to play Cowboys and Indians," my son says.

I ask him why he wants to play Cowboys and Indians, and how it works.

"Good guys," he thinks for a minute, "are Cowboys, and they get the Indians."

"Well, not all Cowboys are good guys," I say. My father ruffles him off his back and sits up.

"Yeah, they're the good guys, Mom-my."

"Well. Then, who are they bad guys?" I ask, looking at the carpet.

"Uhm . . . the Indians!"

"Why are they bad?"

"Uhm . . . " he shrugs his shoulders.

While I talk, my father scoffs. My mother laughs. I tell my son that we don't say that word anymore. They are Native Americans because they lived here before the Cowboys. "That's stupid," my father says. "It doesn't matter, and that's stupid."

"The cowboys weren't very nice," I say. "They hurt the Indians and took their things. And so did a lot of other people, they hurt the Indians and took their things. And they are not called Indians."

“Look, the Indians are friends with the Cowboys in this one—they help each other out,” my father interjects, and I ask him who is helping whom and he tells me this is stupid. It doesn’t matter. My son asks if Indians are the good guys and the cowboys are the bad guys. My father grunts, he’s annoyed. My son is confused. His lips curl downward.

I want to think I am telling my son that some cowboys are good and some are bad. I want to think I am telling him that some Native Americans are good and some are bad. That they’re all people, but that the Native Americans were hurt badly and unfairly. He asks if the cowboys were helpful or hurtful, and I want to say, hurtful, baby, but I say nothing. “This is so stupid,” my father repeats. “Papa said a naughty word.” “Yes,” I manage to say.

So I begin telling my son about race when he is three, and I want to make sure I’m not yelling or lecturing. No barbed fences rising around his mind, or hard walls with strict corners, no prisons or darkness, a little fear. I want to help him question in a way that frightens his papa.

“So what? You’re not going to let him watch anything?” My father is laughing now.

As a child, my father forbade watching *The Smurfs* because Gargamel is the name of a demon. Even as my classmates watched the show and giggled at his rule, this was his belief. Something that mattered to him. A belief and a ban that were respected, mostly. I imagine what my father would have felt if one afternoon my sister and I were mimicking Gargamel’s pentagram induced sorcery. I wonder if he can find it in himself to

understand that this intent, this belief that these shows misrepresent race and history, that it really matters to me. Even if he can't understand. Even if it cuts away from some fun.

My son looks scared and confused, his whole face a sherbet swirl.

I'm careful not to move my face when I'm thinking or speaking. Everyone in the room, a half-breath. "I never said that."

"So you're not going to let him watch John Wayne?"

"I never said that either."

"He needs to toughen up," my father says.

My son curls downward, and sits on my lap.

"Why?" I want my son to see that you never have to fight, not really. That there's always a decision. Even when you're hurting. Even when you're afraid.

"Because he needs to learn to be a man."

If you search for Baby X studies on Youtube, you can watch a series of social experiments performed on the American public regarding gender stereotypes. In my night class, we had watched social scientists dress a baby in boys' clothing and ask strangers to describe "his" personality—the personality of a six month old. We watched strangers, both men and women, describe the baby as tough, active, thoughtful. Next, we saw them dress the same infant in girls' clothing and ask strangers to describe "her" personality. Suddenly, "she" was quiet, shy, and timid. On the drive to pick my son up, I wondered whether I am truly hyper-emotional, intuitive, sensitive, or whether I have simply been convinced of these traits throughout life. Conditioned. Groomed. I wonder if I am really horrible with directions and a poor driver, or if I am simply fulfilling these mantras. I wonder if my father ever wanted to cry but chose, instead, to appear tough. I wonder



what parts of himself this practice required he methodically excise, disown. I wonder if he ever misses them. The parts that toughness cut away.

“You don’t have to be tough to be a man,” I say. “He’s not going to turn into anything he isn’t meant to be.”

At two years old, my son chose a pair of hot pink mittens at Goodwill. Undoubtedly entranced by the most fluorescent choice. A thick, warm pair, he chose one pair of pink mittens, a pair of green, and a pair of red. All of them equally warm and reasonably priced. All of them merely products of different combinations of dye in cotton. But only one set carries morality and evil, coats my son’s small hands in other people’s judgments.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to teach him, playing with dolls, pretending his stuffed animals are babies. Trying to make him . . . “

My son is nestled against my chest now, a double holster hiked around his waist through a notch we had to add. I push the orange pistols toward his back so they don’t stab into his stomach. He has always been small for his age, and this makes me anxious. It makes me feel like other people judge my parenting. I feel the smallness of his waist like a warm guilt that I cannot protect him.

“Well. He needs to toughen up, anyway. You won’t let him play fight. When I was his age . . . “

“I picked out the bow he got for Christmas.” I say, interrupting his musing. I don’t raise my voice. “I picked out the bow he wanted, to be like his favorite character: Merida.”

“There’s no reason,” he says at some point, “for all this political correctness.”

The phrase does not register with my son, and laughing, he says:

“Mom-my! Look at the horses! Mom-my!” My son points at the TV. The Western the adults have abandoned. He doesn’t notice skin color or politics or even the aggression. He wants to talk about horses.

I tell him we will ride horses in the summer, when the snow is gone. He pretends to be a horse, a deer, a gruffalow, and Iron Man. I do not tell my father about the time that my son decided to be Cat Woman all day, how he referred to himself as “she” as he stayed in perfect character, a born thesbian-master, perhaps. Catwoman is his favorite character: fun and tough, lithe and interesting. “She wants some more milk, mahm-meee!” He would say , and, “Pleeease!” And all I noticed in that moment were his manners. How kind he was growing up to be, and thoughtful, and how he had never learned to view womanhood as an insult. And everything was fine. He had a Ninja Turtle birthday.

I don’t tell my father that I had a panic attack one day last month because I thought I was a bad mother, that I hadn’t taught my son the alphabet soon enough, that I shouldn’t think about the student papers I have to grade when we are playing army guys, that I am selfish because I think I deserve more than being a waitress. In the front hall entryway of our apartment, trying to get coats and boots on, trying to get my son and I to our respective classrooms by eight, I lose the connection between my knees and the cold tile floor, the air and my lungs. I feel the weight of everything I am failing to teach him press me down into hot tears. I don’t tell him that at that very moment, my son brushed the hair out of my eyes and said: “Don’t cry Mom-my. I want to try and make you happy.”

And everything was fine.

## **Ceremone**

Pine trees curl  
moss-tattooed branches,

needled fingers  
knit haloes  
of rain beads,

and shriveled shadows  
play the sunset  
like an un-tuned ukelele

rippled with constellations  
and our prayer-fists.

## **The True Work of Motherhood**

Stephanie Coontz explains from a historical standpoint that “Throughout most of human history, mothers have devoted more time to other duties than to childcare,” (1992, p. xix). If this statement holds academic water, how can the media-perpetuated myth of “new momism” hold so much sway and power in public opinion and stigmatization of mothers and mother-work? Popular media images and political discourses that invoke “traditional family” ideology demonstrate how cultural rhetoric mutates reality and logic to suit a common narrative. The myth that mothers should be considered responsible for every last second of a child’s life, for example, invalidates pursuit of personal interests or work, rather than acknowledging the reality that “parents are only one developmental factor, and they do not make or break children” (Coontz, 1992, p.225).

Just as the concepts and mythology of motherhood are culturally constructed, so the mythology of proper mother-work is deeply rooted in a specific culture, in its history, and in its values. Coontz explains an important shift in the lifestyles of mothers within the last century:

The orderly progression from student to single job-holder to wife to mother to married older worker that prevailed from the 1920s to the 1960s, for example, is now gone. Modern women take on these factors in different orders or occupy all of them at once (p.186).

This observation calls into question the practice of evaluating current mothers by impossibly outdated standards under the misleading title of “traditional values,” which have already been identified as mythological misattributions.

This revelation allows for the logical trajectory to be followed through; first, scripted and imagined mother-characters were touted as the 1950s television ideal. Moving through history, celebrities grounded the myth in a slightly more realistic lifestyle, though still fantastic compared to average families. At least the celebrities of 80s and 90s obsessions had actual lives, careers, and decisions to make about those lives and careers, even if they were privileged in many different ways (Douglas, p.113). This evolution of media's motherhood constructs crafted an image of acceptable mother-work as minimal and flexible, and most importantly, work that is subservient to the exalted privilege of motherhood (Douglas, p.203). Media-based images such as this one often create a collective memory that is not grounded in lived reality, but in scripted fiction and creative nonfiction. This cultural myth of modern American motherhood is a tale of warning: mothers who do not live up to these specific, ever-changing ideals are stigmatized as "bad" mothers.

Amidst the "ever-ballooning standards of motherhood," amongst media frenzy over all the ways mothers are failing, the actual history, research, and lived reality of mothers contradicts the powerful mythos. In spite of the media claims that women in the 90s were fleeing workplaces due to the insipid conditions of daycares, less than 10% of articles from the era found negative correlations between daycare attendance and child development (Douglas, 2004, p. 257). Thurer explains that "Over the centuries, despite wild variations in child care, the incidence of mental illness amongst children, as best we can determine, seems to have been fairly consistent" (1994, p. 300). Coontz specifies that stigmatization of single parenthood was found to effect children, but not single parenthood itself (1992, p. 223). She also explains that several studies find that "women's

satisfaction with either housework or paid work . . . [correlates with] a positive outcome for children” (1992, p. 217). In comparison, the media-fueled myth of motherhood pales next to the deeply complex reality of actual motherhood in real life. More troubling, these myths can incur toxic psychological damage, not just on the mothers, but on the very children and families these myths claim to serve and protect. What can be ascertained from the history and mythology is that no single image, narrative, or stereotype can ever fairly represent a human individual or group.

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