Claiming:

thoughts of an unconventional older mother

by Shirley Glubka

Note: this essay
was first published in
Philosophy in the Contemporary World
Volume 23, Issue 1, Spring 2016
(Special issue: Mothering from the Margins)

Claiming:

thoughts of an unconventional older mother

by Shirley Glubka

He was in me—I
stretched—
pushed him out—
he was still
bloody—I
held him—he
drank from me.

Arriving,
he ripped me.
I fed him.

He was born on the old kitchen table.
He had a plain and decent start.
Three years we were entwined.

The women before me birthed
baby after baby.

Raised them.

I must learn to understand the act of giving up my child.

—from "Old Milk, Blue-white, Merciful" (Glubka 2012a, 11)

———

Koan (Zen Buddhism): "A riddle without a solution used to
demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning
and provoke sudden enlightenment."
—The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

———

The experience of being a mother—or *becoming* a mother, for it is a never-finished, ever-shifting condition—has been my koan. I'm not a Buddhist, and the

thought of "sudden enlightenment" unsettles me, but the word—*koan*—has been for decades one of my words. It fits so well in the hand somehow.

When my son Kevin was three years old his day care teacher came to me. He was very angry, this beautiful boy—a biter, a bit of a problem, though a charismatic one. How she loved him! She herself could not achieve a pregnancy, a sorrow in her life. We talked and talked. He went to live with her, his new mother. I became a shadow mother, a visitor, a sometime babysitter. I felt unsuited for the long work of daily parenting, though exactly what "unsuited" meant was, and still is, more mystery than explanation.

I keep working my koan, this thing in my hand, this rock, this solidity not yet worn away. I'm seventy years old. It's a bit embarrassing, not to be finished. But, as I indicated, I don't seem to believe in sudden—or even not-so-sudden—enlightenment.

—from the Preface to my chapbook,
All the Difference: poems of unconventional Motherhood

———

Feeling my way toward a form for this essay, I produce—as quickly as possible—a list of words that leap and shimmer for me, not just at this moment, but through the decades of my maturity and perhaps further back than that. Impossible, this bit about "the decades." How on earth would I remember? Nevertheless, words tumble out:

being
ground
void
chaos
fracture
radiance
clarity
intensity
calm
call
pull
tensile
steel
light
dark
star
water

shift
stretch
yield

I fall in love with this list. I want to say, "This is who I am, a person who loves this list of twenty words." Next comes a surge of (irrational) desire. I want my list to explain, to express, to reveal—me. When I write about my experience with motherhood, I want the reader to listen, and look back at this list. And understand everything.

Of course I myself don't understand everything. Poet George Oppen's last public statement was "My happiness is the knowledge of all we do not know" (Rudolf, n.p.). Oppen is so frequently my inspiration; my comfort.

———

I am not a philosopher, not a scholar, not a teacher. I read philosophy. I use it for my mind, my heart, my meaning-making, my writing. In poetry, fiction, and discursive prose: Benedict Spinoza slips in; Friedrich Nietzsche; Gilles Deleuze; Simone Weil; Iris Murdoch. Again and again, I welcome them.

———

On Being Unusual

(for example, as a mother)

1) If one lives outside the norm, it is easy to slide into complaint, victimhood, pleading: don't hurt me! make room for me! see me!

2) Living outside the norm: the very fact forces thought; presses the spirit; is a privilege.

I hope to write from stance #2.

———

Threads of mystery glint and pull inside the phenomenon of motherhood. They are visible or invisible, depending on the light of the moment. They make a pattern, then curl to chaos. No matter how she manages it, undergoes it, overcomes it, wades through it, dances upon it: at the heart of each mother's experience and radiating through the days and nights is something inexplicable.

For the biological mother. What is this that grows in her womb? And then emerges! And through the hours, days, months, years: a miniature human growing larger; change and challenge; gift and surprise. Here is a being strangely "hers." No matter what choices she makes, no matter where her motherhood leads: this actual human being, somehow strangely "hers." And not.

For other mothers, various as they are. What is this that comes to her (or to him, for men can mother) by a path perhaps even more puzzling than her/his body: this, small human being, a *person*, now amazingly, mysteriously, somehow "hers" or "his." And not.

What are we to make of this? I mean: in action, daily. I mean: in thought, when thought is possible.

———

John Keats famously describes those with Negative Capability as "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats, 768). He was writing about a core aspect of the Man of Achievement, Shakespeare for example, but I suspect a bit of Negative Capability is a necessary part of the thinking person's equipment these days, even if she isn't...well...a genius of the male gender. Our access ramp to "fact & reason" has been in somewhat broken condition for a long time now. (Which circumstance can be grounds

for joy. Is joy on my list of words? No, I see that it isn't. Perhaps it's a tag-along—too recent to warrant inclusion.)

Keats was a poet determined to embrace the variety of the world. He thought Coleridge cut experience short, molding it to preconception. We do so love "answers," we humans, even in these postmodern times. We readily leap to the brittle ground of preconception, of premature conclusion. If boisterous Reality rises up (I see a big, muscled, laughing woman shouldering up from beneath) that ground will crack. Let us be cautious, then, for motherhood is a topic muscled with Reality—and permeated with Mystery, which can, yes, erupt as joy in response to the very depth, the wonder, the radical impossibility; or curdle to confusion, even to terror. We will need our own little portion of Negative Capability.

———

Some questions from the venerable categories of epistemology, ontology, ethics:

- What kinds of "knowing" might we use to grasp what this *is*, this being-a-mother? And then this being-a-mother in a way so far outside the norm that the very idea of claiming the label can be questioned? Where to enter—with what sort of violence, or gentleness—to access the depths, the innards? How much to trust such "knowing"?
- What is real here? Is there a "ground of being" a mother can stand on—any mother? Does a radical difference in choices cut away any such ground?
- Is anything about the motherhood experience *determined*? By what? God? Nature? Culture? Family? Character?
- Is anything about motherhood free? What *is* freedom? Where does choice enter in? How real is the mother's felt sense of being in charge, shaping her days, her years; how

grounded her feeling of not being in charge, not shaping? How do these questions shift and slip if we focus on the mother who "gives up" her child?

- Is there, and should there be, an ethics of motherhood? How valid or various would such an ethics be? How essentially sorrowful or joyful?

Questions which I will refrain from trying to "answer." However, they will hover.

———

We enter my novel, *Return to a Meadow*. Petra Kalinowski and her daughter Anya are living in San Francisco in the early 1970s.

> Anya had a ready smile and a ready temper. No one trampled her. Petra thought of her as shine, as essence. Then came toilet training. Girls were supposed to be easier, but Anya wasn't easier. At two-and-a-half she was not yet trained. Also, she had started to talk. Petra was passionate about words. She wrote regularly, striving for clarity, for evocative images. She had expected to feel delight when her little girl acquired language but Anya's long slow process of learning to speak got tangled up with toilet training, with rages on the part of mother and daughter, with a caged feeling Petra was sure they both experienced. Anya liked to talk, wanted to talk constantly. Petra found herself shamefully bored. She wanted her own thoughts and couldn't find them. Her mind was the center of herself, she needed to feel it working. Unfocused, pulled this way and that by the demands of a toddler, her mind lost tone, a muscle weakened by disuse. Frustrated by interruptions, Petra stopped reading, stopped writing. After several months of this she was terrified. She went to secondhand bookstores, purchased old paperbacks: Henry James, Ezra Pound. The more difficult the better. She sat with pen in hand, read, took notes, tried to write. Her thoughts were dull and scattered, but she persisted. One day, interrupted for the fifth time in half an hour—she was counting—Petra learned what it was like to feel murderous, to want someone obliterated. Her daughter. This was more terrifying than the decay of her mind. She stopped reading and writing and turned to her will. If she could just strengthen her will, they might be all right. But she couldn't control her irritability. It spread to housemates. She lost tolerance for the changes, the new habits of each incoming person, the fluctuations in household cleanliness, the decibel level. She thought the order and predictability of living alone with Anya might be better. She moved to the Mission district where she could afford a small apartment for herself and Anya. The move made parenting no easier.

> The dread she'd felt inside marriage was back, the suffocation. Loving Anya was not enough. She started to meditate and attend yoga classes. She could breathe, felt hope. Anya turned three. In fifteen years the child would be old enough, on her own. Petra made it a mantra. Fifteen more years, fifteen more. Time slowed, but it didn't stop. She ripped pages from the calendar. May, gone. June, gone. July, finally gone. She could survive this thing she never should have started (Glubka 2012r, 17-19).

———

Though Petra is not simply a stand-in for me, she is at this moment a mother with challenges, needs, and "solutions" that closely parallel those I experienced.

The mind of the mother—how it is challenged, stretched, inspired, cramped; the fact that mothers *have* minds, and not just hearts and hands (and wombs and breasts)—all of this has been acknowledged in recent decades, publicly and privately, by mothers and others. We do know: being a mother can be hard on a woman, hard on her mind, and just plain pervasively difficult. But most mothers don't choose to turn daily parenting over to someone else. If they do, it's likely to be fathers who take that role, or, lacking willing or able fathers, children might be raised by grandparents, aunts, uncles: family. Not the case for Petra. Not for me. Here is the moment in the novel when the crucial decision is made. Petra is with Anya's babysitter:

> Marian, fanning herself with an ad from the day's mail, confided that she had desperately wanted a child of her own but her tubes were clogged. Her uterus was not in great shape either. The two women, mother and babysitter, had never disclosed personal anguish. Petra felt a tremor. Precursor to earthquake. Imagined. Emotional in origin. As she well knew. Once started, Marian kept going. Pelvic Inflammatory Disease, she explained, a bad case of it. She had tried and tried to get pregnant, one man after another, blaming the guys. Finally she listened to her doctor and gave up hope. She told herself life was better without children, but the day she met Petra and Anya two years ago—two years!—she had gone home and cried. "That little girl broke into my heart. Made me want." It was a version of love at first sight. She was sorry she had pretended nonchalance when Petra asked her to babysit. She was so grateful. She cried, telling the story.
>
> ...Marian's tears, Marian's deep green eyes, the unexpected emotion and the strange heat of this San Francisco day coalesced. Here was fecundity, possibility.

> "Marian," Petra said, "I have to tell you about Anya and me." She told how she had set herself for the years of motherhood ahead as if she were a workhorse put into traces—the long furrows, the hot sun, plowing, plowing, interminable plowing—but she was not a workhorse, not bred for the job. If she had to choose again, she wouldn't have a child. It was her mind. She had failed to find a way to have a child and a mind both, could Marian understand that? Marian reached out, gathered her up. Tears came to Petra. *Because it's so warm*, she thought crazily. She'd been cold in San Francisco where the borderline climate did not demand central heating. By the end of the conversation she and Marian had made a decision neither could have anticipated. Anya would live with Marian. Petra would stay in her daughter's life, part-time caretaker. Like a divorced father. The child was three-and-a-half years old when she moved in with her new mother. Marian (Glubka 2012r, 19-20.)

———

For Petra and for me: the 1970s, the West Coast, counter-culture, second wave of feminism, revolution in the air. An intensity of *permission* saturated the days. Radical choices could be made; were made. The question: would this voluntary transfer of a child (my protagonist's, mine) from the care of the biological mother to that of another woman have taken place outside this cultural context? I doubt it. But even then, even there, most mothers raised their own children, conventionally or unconventionally. How is it that Petra made this unusual choice? How is it that I did?

Petra feels she is "not bred for the job." This echoes my own statement: "I felt unsuited for the long work of daily parenting."

"Unsuited." Has Petra explained this sufficiently? Have I? *Can* we?

I could turn to psychology. I could tell you that a friend recently asked what Myers-Briggs type I am. "INTJ," said I. "No wonder parenting was so hard on you," said my friend.

Well, maybe. It was a kind thing to say and made me feel "seen" for a couple of days. I suppose it's possible that an introverted, intellectually inclined woman with a passion for writing

might have a "harder" time parenting. Harder than any other type, though? Was parenting more difficult for me than for other mothers? I have no answer to this question. I doubt if such a question *can* be answered. I even, and perhaps importantly, doubt its relevance.

I do not, however, doubt this: motherhood holds at its core some of the deepest challenges of human existence. They are there, alive, threatening, wonder-laden—like strange gods of the psyche—whether ignored by a culture or not; whether ignored by a mother or not.

———

But—the question cannot be ignored—how can a woman, a mother, *do* what I did? How could *I*? And oh, how very many answers have come to me, often in the middle of the night.

The self-excoriating group. I'm a narcissist, perhaps with a core of sociopathy, certainly selfish, and probably numb to opportunities for empathy. Essentially fragile, weak at the core. Unable to persist. Never mind that the rest of my life does not support such explanations.

The grandiose group. I was smart enough, independent enough, courageous enough, *responsible* enough to buck all internal and external pressures and find a better mother for Kevin. But wait: "find"? It was serendipity, this meeting of Kevin's second mother. Wasn't it?

The philosophical answer. It must have been Fate. But I don't believe in Fate. Or do I? What would that even *mean*?

Did Petra say it all? "It was her mind. She had failed to find a way to have a child and a mind…"

Perhaps I found a genuine nugget years ago when I wrote this: "I have often wondered at least half-seriously if my simple inability to pay attention to two things at once might lie at the core of my problems with mothering" (1983, 226). And I surely thought I had something here: "I

left the mother role because in a radical way I did not like the job of being a mother; and because I believed that Kevin would be better off if he were raised by someone who wanted to do that kind of work; and because, by some miracle, that person appeared in my life" (1983, 225).

———

It is the late 1970s and I'm working on my masters thesis in psychology. I've been reading Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976, *passim*) and will rely heavily on Rich's complex and groundbreaking concept of the Institution of Motherhood, but I need something more. One day it comes: *Aha! Motherhood has three aspects*.

1) The Institution: I feel knowledgable about this aspect courtesy of Rich's work and my own radical political/cultural context. The "institution of motherhood" explains why I got pregnant and gave birth to a child. I don't think it explains why I'm not raising him. Certainly not.

2) The mother/child relationship: I love and even like Kevin. He seems to feel the same about me. I think we're compatible human beings, which matters. I'm hearing about mother-child incompatibility in the group I've organized for women who have left the conventional mother role. The guilt and pain that come with such incompatibility are intense. I am oh-so-grateful I don't have *that* to contend with.

3) The work. There it is. There's my problem. I can now explain my radical parenting decision. It is rooted in the "work" aspect of motherhood.

It was a pretty good thesis, useful to me and to others (Starkweather/Glubka1978, *passim*).

But now, examining my thoughts one more time, I realize how excessively clear that "insight" was. The frame cracks. I did not simply have a problem with a job. I did not simply leave the "work" of "daily parenting." I caused an earthquake in the entire mother-child gestalt.

Living together: it's so *much*. All those *details*, all that *time*...

Kevin and I stay in contact. There has never been a break in that, though the frequency has varied rather wildly. I think our relationship is still a good one. If he thinks otherwise, he doesn't tell me. But he didn't grow up with me. It's a big fact.

———

More from my novel:

> Petra experienced the separation physically, as if it were surgery on a battlefield, a part of herself cut away without anesthesia, but pain did not blur basic clarity, not then. Her pain was clear and her sense of release was equally clear. If Marian, godsent, had not come into their lives, she would have raised Anya, but Marian had come, and a painful choice had been made. In an agony of freedom, agreeing to what she believed was best for her daughter and herself, she survived. A long ropey scar remained—spiritual, real—evidence of severed connection, evidence of ordeal. Years later, clarity did blur. Youthful certainty crumbled. How could she have given up her child? But that was later.
>
> Who could see into Anya? She adopted the name of the black cat, Marian's queenly Fire. "My name is Fire," said young Anya. They called her that for six months, until she said "My name is Anya, call me Anya." It seemed she had come to terms. She was still bright and spunky. Shining. The two women were concerned, but hopeful. They leaned into one truth: the child was wanted now without reservation (2012r, 20-21).

In these paragraphs, Petra and I are almost one person. Anya and Kevin are not too far removed from each other either, though there is, not insignificantly, a shift in the child's gender. How tolerant Kevin is, that he makes no objection to such a move, or any other, on the part of his first mother: "It's your writing." He's a good person.

———

For years—maybe for decades—I had bouts of sobbing. I didn't give these to Petra. The novel moves into a more firmly fictional mode: decades after Anya goes to live with Marian,

Petra finds herself presented with a baby, to raise or not to raise. (It is the novelist's right: to torment her protagonist.)

_____

A year after Kevin went to live with his second mother, I wrote this poem:

Kevin, Four-and-a-half

This child insists on growing.
He is a measure for me still,
stern as a ruler by mere fact of being.
Beyond fact is the shining.

Boy bewitched by magic,
master of tricks when I visit,
composer of jokes, counter to ten, adder up,
he laughs, then runs to mother his brood,
his Larry, his Hari, his Tigger, his Elephant;
does not need me.

The cord's almost cut clean.
The still unsevered bit of need is mine.
Without him I'd spill time absently
like lukewarm tea (2012a, 10.)

Such clarity I felt then: "does not need me." The appeal of clarity is strong for me. I visit these lines from George Oppen's "Route" again and again:

Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful
thing in the world,

A limited, limiting clarity (Oppen 2008, 193)

I ponder that last line. A limited, limiting clarity. Which is beautiful. I think: "a lot of philosophy there." I wonder, though, if I even know what I mean by that. When Oppen writes "limited, limiting," the words are so lovely, so reassuring. The word itself, *clarity*, can carry me to a calm center within, pool-like, and to the sensation of "knowing." I remind myself to add a

dash of Negative Capability, necessary element, to my instinctive attraction to Oppen's most beautiful thing in the world.

———

When Kevin was turning twenty-one, I wrote this:

Coming of Age

I have been thinking of strings
and how you will soon turn 21.
I have been thinking of packages
and how they come undone.
Inside, the surprise—
more string
and strong after all.

You were an odd package,
pushed out like a pup
and tied to me,
full of firm flesh, yelling well.
I had no worry about deficit of being.
You were enough. I could feel that with my fingers.
Perhaps you should know: such an imprint lingers.

The umbilical cord has no nerves.
Not mother nor child feels the cut.
It happened while I was distracted
by the form of your lovely left foot.
Down, down goes the root
of your lovely left foot.

One foot follows the other.
You had in fact two feet.
I also had two feet.
We had our roads to walk.
I set you on your separate path.
You had not come of age.
A child at three is not yet come of age.

Separation is always a gamble.
Who will fly into which universe?

Imagine a pattern of knots and holes
stretching from planet to planet,
a cosmic macramé,
a web sprung into being
almost by accident,
the design not discernible
to those who walk on one spun filament
each toward the other
like clowns on a tightrope.
They meet in the middle
as if by accident.
They stumble but they do not fall.
The crowd cheers—
luck holds—

we
do not fall
after all (Glubka 2012a, 16-17).

———

Five years later:

Husk

There is a dried-stalk texture to this day before your birthday
as if autumn intervened in summer's time.
You are finally angry with me, fire child,
but it is husk only you hand me.
It is over the phone and across the country.
You are a gentleman opening a metaphorical door into modified rage,
bowing slightly as I cross the portal, lifting my long lady's skirt.

But I haven't worn a skirt since that job interview in 1973.
Come on, kid, let's duke it out. You think I damaged you? I did.
I chose a troubled father for you. That was error number one. Left him.
Then left you.
Don't know how I did that. Don't know why.

I could tell you the tale of the time
and how it would be good for you.
That seems unfair inside this fight.

Hurt you by taking myself away, did I?
Then give it to me on the jaw,
dislocate the place my words pour from.
Draw blood. Crack bone.

I threw you up and thought you were well caught.
I believed you'd fly, the two of you.
She was like a goddess of the air,
elemental, green and lively in her eyes.
I thought a goddess caught you.
Expanse of air did not scare your second mother, son.
I was all eyes, but filming through my own bent lens.
I failed to follow as she flew with you
and failed to see you struggle free and fall.

"I'm sorry" doesn't cut it, I know that.
And you won't be the one to break the place my words come from.
I'll crack my own tight jaw some day
and chew whatever husk of rage you hand to me (Glubka 2012a, 22-23).

_____

One of my most recently written motherhood poems:

In the Imperative

i.
How authentically sourced were the tears
from the eyes of the mother I was and was not?

How valid the sobbing
after movies with vivid and fictional children?

Genuine, though, was the strict prohibition:
take no pleasure in the offspring of others.

The rule held: irrational, useless, necessary.
Then was sanely abandoned. My son was long grown.

But the years of strange discipline find their purpose.
They speak to me: idiosyncratic woman, you were not blithe.

ii.

When the matter of human existence is bent toward gravity,
allowed to fall unrepentant, sober, relieved

into its own chance-driven destiny like the apparently ugly
and deeply decided (joy-seeded) (distorted) (beautiful)

triptychs of Francis Bacon, pushing itself into the psyche
like a determined and violent god, the watcher attends.

iii.
Blithe we are not, who crawl, leap, fly
elsewhere.

See how the thought has striven and then stepped aside.
Deny not the difference.

iv.
When I go there
I don't know I'm there.

Essential not to know
to know not to know.

Emerge afterward, though. Claim (Glubka 2012a, 30-31).

_____

Reflections: the work of self-portrait

When Francis Bacon, the twentieth century painter, spoke in an interview about his numerous self-portraits, he claimed that he didn't actually like his face but it was convenient, always there. I suspect this was sidestepping, dodging a question he couldn't, or didn't choose to, answer—or felt he had answered in the art. Whether he liked his face or not, he was willing to look at it. To look as an artist looks. And then to work with it. Push and pull at it, distort it, invite the ugly, dare the astonishing, the unconventional, the uniquely beautiful.

Bacon's self-portrait of 1971 pushes the nose to the side; pulls the lips out of synch with the rest of the face, somehow both downward and upward; saddens the shape of the features; saddens the entire countenance, and yet brightens it; intensifies *his own face* with luminous white and deeply opaque black—and vivid unexpected colors. I have learned to love this portrait.

But is it Francis Bacon? The basic dimensions roughly match: the width of the head, the length. I imagine him standing back, looking at this painting,

knowing it as one attempt—flawed, even dishonest in ways only he can see. He nods, accepting: there it is.

The poems in *All the Difference* make a composite self-portrait of sorts, partial, contradictory, layered by time. The work is flawed, as slices of perception and the efforts of language tend to be. With elements of sidestepping, shards of truth, and swaths of distortion: there it is.

I was brought up to be a nice girl, a good girl, a fine student—ordinary and wholesome as white bread from the Sunbeam bakery a short walk from our house along the cement sidewalks of small town Minnesota. It was the 1940s, the 1950s. I had a mother and a father and four siblings. I went to church and to Catholic school. I entered the convent and stayed for six years, until it seemed a more authentic life might be lived "in the world."

As it turned out, I "gave up" my child; and, by the way, I am a lesbian. I am aware that both of these facts can cause some people to feel like vomiting. Not everyone, of course. But even some of my family and friends who most love (and respect) me, who have no problem with lesbianism, no problem with unconventional paths in general, are on some level appalled that I made the decision not to continue the daily parenting of my little boy. They don't condemn me, not at all, but in some way—perhaps viscerally, perhaps cognitively—they are appalled. Decades after the fact, a few have told me.

I happened upon the work of Francis Bacon late in life. I have been unpredictably and powerfully attracted to what has also repulsed me. I have learned to look at a piece of hung meat in one panel of a triptych (Bacon 1962) that offers in another panel two bloodied distorted naked bodies (coupling? cuddling?) on a splayed piece of furniture—red, orange, white, black; a single thin strip of vertical green. The third panel (I read them from right to left) has a pair of witnessing figures; one seems to me to be the painter himself. I have developed a need to see what I was not raised to see: the violence of the beauty; the force, the vitality of matter; of flesh. Guided by philosopher Gilles Deleuze's work on Bacon, I can sometimes sense a metaphysical fecundity in these paintings—with matter, flesh, meat at the heart (Deleuze 2005, *passim*).

To cut into the guts of reality, and see: bloody flesh undivided from beauty, which can be contemplated. Is this what an artist like Bacon, or an aesthetically inclined surgeon, or even an alert butcher in back of a chain grocery store, does? (While the rest of us might feel like running to vomit?)

The astonishing fact of flesh: is it ever comprehended? Think: every human starts—tiny; so tiny—inside the body of another. We are so deeply animal. Appallingly; wondrously.

There is a whirl of strangeness, incomprehensibility, and just plain good sense at center of my radical parenting decision. I try to look. Despite all vacillations, at the age of seventy I find I am neither complacent nor horrified (Glubka 2012a, 33-34).

I direct my mind to the question of social stigmata. Immediately, an internal voice suggests I am entering "tarred territory." Tarred? I close my eyes. Brer Rabbit is punching the Tar-Baby because he can't get a friendly response to his morning greeting. His hand sticks fast to the tar. He punches with the other fist, with predictable results. He tries kicking, no longer needing a friendly response, needing only release: "en de Brer Rabbit lose de use er his feet in de same way." His remaining weapon is his head, which of course gets stuck in tar (Harris 1881, n.p.).

Ah, yes. If we need the world to give us a friendly response—we who "deviate," whether as mothers or as sexual beings—we might just get ourselves uncomfortably stuck to, or in, that "world." But perhaps I can refrain from punching. Perhaps I can peer with a certain delicacy and walk on down the road. *

I'm thinking of that moment when I'm on the phone with the scheduler at the hospital where I will have my mammogram. I am asked, as some form is being filled out, if I'm married (amazingly, I am). Next comes the inevitable request for the name of my husband. I do say it: "Actually, I'm a lesbian." Easier than it used to be, but far from comfortable. Even now, when the wave of gay marriage rolls across our country gathering speed and force, when youth culture sometimes seems to us oldsters downright blasé about sexual orientation, it takes a deep breath

---

* I'm aware that any reference to the Tar-Baby can be linked to a racist gestalt, which is certainly not my intention. The image itself, the Tar-Baby to which one can get stuck, seems mythic to me, with resonances broad and deep and far from racist. My research has led to the controversy over whether or not the very use of the term Tar-Baby is racist, a question which is real and important and very much alive, but also to the roots of the tale in West African folklore, to possible connections to Native American tales such as the Cherokee "Tar Wolf," and to stories of a rabbit and tar-baby in indigenous Meso-American and South American cultures. See, for example, "Relationship between Anansi and Br'er Rabbit" at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anansi. Because this process has been so interesting and has, frankly, led me to deeper and deeper respect for the actual old tale, I have decided to use the image here. I do hope this is not offensive.

and a dose of courage for me to say those words.

Shift things a bit. It is the same phone call, the form is still being filled out. I am asked if I have children. That's comfortable enough. I have the proper response, "One son." Next I am asked if I raised him. *What?* I freeze, struggle to get my breath, force the words out: "Only until he was three years old." Caught by surprise, I am radically unprepared to "come out" in this way.

But of course the question—*did you raise your child?*—is not asked. Not ever. The circumstance in fact is not imagined.

Conclusion: stigma greater in the area of motherhood than in the area of sexuality.

On the other hand: many have been beaten—or murdered—because their sexual orientation was considered "weird," "monstrous," "evil." I know of no mother who left the traditional mother role and got physically attacked or killed as a result.

Conclusion: stigma greater in the area of sexuality; or at least more dangerous.

There is an old saying: *Comparisons are odious.*

———

A new day arrives. I consider again the question of social stigmata. I still have the Tar-Baby in mind. I'm cautious. Nevertheless: in a daily way, putting aside for a moment the issue of physical attack, of murder, *is* motherhood more firmly held to the social norm than sexuality? I know of no research that looks at the question.

I raise the issue with my partner (now spouse) of 35 years. Ginny is a psychotherapist and has worked with mothers and children for decades. Her first thought is that every mother for at least ten minutes, at least once, desperately wants out: an unacceptable desire, deeply

threatening. In contrast, says Ginny, not all straight women go through ten minutes of desperately wishing they were lesbians. We laugh. All right. So that's a thought.

Ginny's next idea takes us to the brain chemistry of motherhood, oxytocin, bonding. she thinks of Darwinism, the continuation of the species. We need motherhood, as a species. Not the same when it comes to needing lesbians. So: a possible biological/evolutionary basis for considering the non-normative mother more abhorrent than the person who is non-normative sexually. I see the depth of the idea. But I wonder: doesn't *variety* aid the survival of the species?

I add my own thought. We young Catholics were firmly taught: it is against the Sixth Commandment to do much of anything sexual. Exception: intercourse with husband. If you sin against the sixth commandment, you confess your "sin of impurity" on Saturday afternoon, receive your penance and walk out clean-souled, forgiven. The idea of confessing to a "motherhood sin" and being forgiven is a strange one indeed. What commandment would be violated? If giving up daily parenting were a sin, it would be a sin without a name.

And I think: "Back to invisibility. Unthinkability. Only the worst..."

And I think: "But gay people get murdered..."

Enough. I wonder if I've got all four appendages, and my head, stuck in the tar. Does it *matter* which stigma is more severe?

———

More important than social stigma: ethics. Let us turn briefly to Immanuel Kant and his much-maligned Categorical Imperative which would have us act only according to maxims we would be happy to declare Universal Law (Kant 1993, 30). My first impulse is to join the maligners. I would not say to the mothers of the world, "Act as I have acted." That the world

would *work*, the human world, if we all made only the ethical decisions we'd want everyone else to make: ridiculous. What about variety? What about *reality*?

But I have second thoughts. I think of Simone Weil, levels of ontology, levels of ethics (Weil 1972, *passim*). A person can't stand on one level and achieve a full range of experiences, of perspectives. Nor, from a single level, can she make all decisions.

———

I contemplate levels. If I take myself to the deepest level, find the route, and then the root, will ethics and ontology meet and join?

I believe Benedict Spinoza did that (Spinoza 1992, *passim*).

I'm not Spinoza.

Nevertheless. If I take my ethics to the most profound ontological level available to me, use everything I've been given, from within and without, and then, in a radical gesture, throw it all out, and stand naked before my own reality—

If we all did that—

Could this be at the heart what Kant meant? But I confess: it's been too many years since I read Kant.

———

Deleuze dismantles Plato's hierarchy wherein the Idea is the pinnacle, the mundane "real" a flawed copy. Deleuzian "difference"—expressed in the vast array of the ever-emerging multitude of things—is not derivative, not secondary, not striving to match an Ideal (Deleuze 1994, *passim*). The implications for a mother like me are many and amazing. Perhaps, though, for any mother?

———

Spinoza insists that regret—a "sad passion," passive in nature—is useless, even harmful. It cannot take us to the Third Way of Knowing, the Intellectual Love of God—a goal attainable only through nurturing "active passions," i.e. emotions that lead to an increase, not a decrease, in our power/reality/being. Joy, for example (Spinoza 1992, *passim*, but see especially *Ethics* Part IV, Proposition 54).

Nietzsche also was anti-regret. Here is his *amor fati*: "that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but *love* it" Nietzsche 2000, 714).

I, too, am not inclined toward regret. Even my bouts of sobbing were never about regret. Pain, yes. Doubt, yes. Sorrow and apology for any distress I caused Kevin, yes. But regret, no.

———

I ask my doubting self: "How could you *know*, at any stage of this long process, whether Kevin would have been better off if you'd raised him?" A strong grounding in Negative Capability is what I ask of this self. Hard for her to attain. But the complexities are enormous: one entire complicated real life vs. a presumably equally complicated hypothetical life. Impossible to compare the two.

And, it comes to me now, *none of my business*.

The mother's cliché: "They have their own lives to live." Oft said. How often believed?

———

When we mothers look back, judging ourselves—a thing we both must and must not do—might "how the child turns out" be an irrelevant consideration? Even for those of us who chose to let go of the usual mother role? If Kevin had become, say, a serial killer, I might not dare to ask such a question. But I am lucky, Kevin has done nothing beyond the pale, and I do ask such a question.

———

Iris Murdoch: "Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real" (Murdoch 1999, 203). Not the usual take on motherly love—or any other kind of love. But if we can grasp that our children exist as entire persons, with as much *being* as we experience in ourselves (and, by the way, if we are beyond blaming—or crediting—our own mothers for how *our* lives are going) there is a next logical step: what the child does with her/his life is neither the mother's fault nor her glory.

I think of the individual life, how it emerges from that place where the phenomenon of existence itself bubbles: out of the creativity of Spinoza's God, perhaps: "Spinoza's dry God who doesn't gush, / who simply exists / yet can't resist incessant creativity" (Glubka 2013, 44).

That direct connection—to *existence*. The radical fact: that we exist. A fact each of us owns, down to the tiniest fiber of her body/mind/heart/soul/being. In some way, we are, all of us, no one else's business, and motherhood doesn't change that.

Of course everything is paradoxical and we are all—every existent, past, present, and future—part of the web. The butterfly's wing *can* probably change the path of the tornado on the other side of the world. We are radically Individual and radically One: "A single and same voice for

the whole thousand-voiced multiple, a single and same Ocean for all the drops, a single clamour of Being for all beings…" (Deleuze 1994, 304).

———

From my journal:

> An infinite/eternal where the lines from being to being are all alive and where the mother *knows*: she is there, and her child is there also, and in such good shape, connected into that same place at the roots of existence, a place which is, without contradiction, a radically separate one for each—is *this* at the heart of my own "motherhood philosophy"?

———

Works Cited

Bacon, Francis. 1962 painting. *Triptych, Three Studies for a Crucifixion.*

Bacon, Francis. 1971 painting. *Self-portrait*.

Brown, Lesley, ed. 1993. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: on historical principles*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1994. *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. 2005. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation.* (Daniel W. Smith trans., intro. and afterward by Tom Conley.) Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Glubka, Shirley. 2012. *All the Difference: poems of unconventional motherhood.* Prospect, Maine: Blade of Grass Press.

Glubka, Shirley. 2013. *Echoes and Links.* Prospect, Maine: Blade of Grass Press.

Glubka, Shirley. 1983. "Out of the Stream: an Essay on Unconventional Motherhood," first published 1983 in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2; subsequently in 1994 in Rosie Jackson ed. *Mothers Who Leave: behind the myth of women without their children,* London: Pandora, imprint of Harper Collins; and in 1998 in Lucinda Joy Peach ed. *Women in Culture: a Women's Studies Anthology,* Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.

Glubka, Shirley. 2012. *Return to a Meadow.* Prospect, Maine: Blade of Grass Press.

Harris, Joel Chandler. 1881. "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story" in *Uncle Remus: Legends of the Old Plantation.* (Courtesy of http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/remus/tar-baby.html.)

Kant, Immanuel. 1993. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (James W. Ellington trans.) Third edition. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co.

Keats, John. 1973. Letter to his brothers December 21/27, 1817 in Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling eds. *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: Romantic Poetry and Prose.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Murdoch, Iris. 1999. "The Sublime and the Good" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature.* New York: Penguin Books.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2000. "Ecce Homo" in Walter Kaufman, ed. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche.* (Peter Gay trans. and intro.) New York: The Modern Library.

Oppen, George. 2008. "Route" in Michael Davidson ed. *George Oppen: New Collected Poems.* (Preface by Eliot Weinberger.) New York: New Directions Publishing.

Rich, Adrienne. 1976. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton.

Rudolf, Anthony. 2008. "George Oppen Centennial Symposium: the Shape of Disclosure" at http://www.bigbridge.org/BB14/OP-RUD.HTM.

Spinoza, Baruch. 1992. Seymour Feldman ed. *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters.* (Samuel Shirley trans.) Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Starkweather, Shirley. (Married name of Shirley Glubka—first marriage.) 1978. "Leaving the Mother Role: a Study in Choices." Masters Thesis, unpublished. The Fielding Institute, Santa Barbara, California.

Weil, Simone. 1972. *Gravity and Grace*. (Gustave Thibon trans. and intro.) London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.