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LEARNING TO CREATE:  
A COLLECTION OF PERSONAL ESSAYS

by  
Naomi Lund Christiansen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of English  
Brigham Young University  
August 2004

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Naomi Lund Christiansen

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Naomi Lund Christiansen in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### LEARNING TO CREATE: A COLLECTION OF PERSONAL ESSAYS

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Department of English

Master of Arts

This is a creative thesis that focuses on the infertility experiences of the author. The introduction examines the author's justification for choosing personal essay as a genre and French feminism as the guiding theory in writing the essays. Six personal essays center on the author's attempts to have a child and the discoveries and failures along the way.

Throughout literary history, women's bodies have traditionally been viewed from the outside looking in, as objects to be reified and preserved or exploited and used. Using the writing the body critics as a theoretical framework, the essays discuss the comforts and discomforts of being inside a female body looking out. Although personal, the essays attempt to connect to the larger world. In several of the essays associations are made between the experiences of the author and the experiences of other women. Several essays also reveal the differing perspectives between her and her husband as they experience infertility.

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## Getting Naked

The second time I went to visit my fertility specialist, the nurse told me to get undressed and left me in the room with one of those scanty hospital gowns folded neatly on the examining bed. I stripped down completely, only to find that the robe wasn't even a robe, just a square lap cloth. When I came to Dr. Andrew's office before, I was asked to take off all of my clothing. I assumed that this time was no different—the nurse must have forgotten to leave me a gown. I opened all the cupboards and doors, looking for a gown. Not finding one, I just wrapped my lap cloth around my body like a sarong and went out into the hall to find someone. Halfway down the hall I bumped into the doctor, the nurse, and another patient. All three looked horrified by my naked arms, shoulders, and knees. The nurse looked at the doctor and ushered me quickly back into my examining room before she would even listen to what I was looking for. It turned out that I was only supposed to get undressed from the waist down. “Put some of your clothes back on,” she said, “and then I'll have the doctor come in.” Imagine a little bare shoulder offending a man who examines the most private regions of women's bodies all day. While writing the essays in my thesis, I've again felt embarrassed by my nakedness and then angry that I feel embarrassed.

Because I've been to so many doctors in the last four years, my own nakedness has become a strange but comforting thing. Repeated encounters with the duck-mouthed metal speculum and the ultrasonic vaginal probe don't leave me with much of a feeling of control. I'm more likely to leave the doctor's office with a large stack of prescriptions and another three diagnoses of medical problems. Choosing how much clothing I remove is about the only choice I can make. Do I leave my socks on during dilation? Read *Good Housekeeping* or *Parents* while I wait? The doctor says it's up to me. Not being embarrassed by my own

flesh, that's a choice I can make. It's not centerfold material, my naked body, but getting to know it might help me to decide when it's time to cover up.

The choice to go to graduate school has literally been an extension of my inability to subvert my own body to my will and the resulting frustration. As I have experienced my body as traitor, first through the difficulty in getting pregnant, and then through repeated miscarriages, I have looked for other ways to control my own creative production. In writing this collection of personal essays, I am discovering the irony of thinking I can have complete control over any creative effort. However, while learning how to be more objective about the weaknesses in my personal and very vulnerable text, I have made better friends with my own body. When I began my studies I was not sure what genre I would choose for my thesis or what theoretical background would be most helpful.

During my coursework I began to see that the personal essay was the most useful genre for my communication goals. I wanted to learn to write honestly, to be able to articulate my own experience for myself and others. I hoped that my writing would be skillful and candid enough to spark dialogue with my readers, that they would want to make connections between their personal lives and my own. As I began writing, I felt that my physical body was an important part of my personal experience. Although afraid of crossing the line of appropriate reading/writing material in the BYU environment, I knew that I needed to learn to write more explicitly about my physical body. In order to justify, mostly for myself, the writing of my own body, I turned to French feminism. While the French feminists often do cross lines that I am not comfortable crossing, they provide a theoretical framework for women's writing that coincides with my own writing goals.



## **I. The importance of a personal genre**

All writers use life experience as fodder for new novels, poems, even formal essays. However, the personal essayist has a particular stake in life experience because s/he admits to the reader that the essay stems from real life, from a personal life. Because there is no truly fictional character to hide behind, personal essayists are often more able and willing to admit to the connections between their own lives and their writing. In “Why I Chose the Creative Nonfiction Way of Life,” Lee Gutkind outlines his goals for both writing and life.

First I wanted to be understood. That is, I wanted people to be interested in my ideas and feelings generally—and what I knew, specifically. Secondly, I wanted my ideas and experiences to make an impact on other people—to change or influence a small part of the world, in one way or another. In order to achieve those goals, I had to more thoroughly understand myself. And I had to learn a great deal about how other people lived. (258)

Patricia Hampl also emphasizes the convergence of nonfiction writing and real life:

Memoir must be written because each of us must have a created version of the past. Created: that is, real, tangible, made of the stuff of a life lived in place and in history. And the down side of any created thing as well: we must live with a version that attaches us to our limitations, to the inevitable subjectivity, of our points of view. We must acquiesce to our experience and our gift to transform experience into meaning and value. You tell me your story, I’ll tell you my story. (265)

Gutkind’s and Hampl’s words reflect my own motivation for completing a creative thesis. I wanted to use writing to learn to communicate more honestly, understand my own

experience, and engage in dialogue with others. Writing about myself allowed me more direct access to accomplishing personal goals, for writing and living.

### **A. Personal essay is a touchy subject**

The personal in personal essay seems to be a touchy subject. I keep hearing advice, especially for beginning writers: “Don’t write about something that’s too close too home-- You’ll fail if you can’t separate yourself from your subject.” In other words, revealing oneself only works if the writer already understands what is being revealed. I agree to a point. The purpose of personal essay isn’t to display personal griefs. Rather, the writing should make a connection with a larger audience “to strike the universal chord” that Lee Gutkind pushes (<http://www.creativenonfiction.org/thejournal/whatisconf.htm>). If writing becomes too self-engrossed, it fails at making any connections. However, the fear of becoming too egocentric has often translated into my writing as vague and uninteresting prose. Confusing personal details with sentimentality, I’m sometimes afraid to show the most interesting parts of myself.

I’m not the first person to ask how subjective personal essay writing can and should be. In her essay, “Me and My Shadow,” Jane Tompkins asks, “How can we speak personally to one another and yet not be self-centered? How can we be part of the great world and yet remain loyal to ourselves?” (356). The problems associated with any attempt to answer often seem insurmountable. I want to be honest as a writer and as a person, but there is also a definite danger. Talking about his own writing Tracy Kidder admits “this prescription for honesty often served instead as a license for self-absorption on the page. But I was still very

young, too young and self-absorbed to realized what now seems obvious—that I was less likely to write honestly about myself than about anyone else on earth” (281).

Initially, I thought the answer to the question posed by Tompkins was to never write about an experience until I had achieved an emotional distance that allowed me to objectively assess the situation. Ironically, when I wrote about experiences I thought I understood, my writing sounded dishonest and stilted. When I thought I was communicating something important to the world, I felt disloyal to myself and ultimately communicated very little of value. Writing in the midst of an experience often revealed details and emotions that were more real and honest than my “objective” writing. However, these drafts were also unfocused and full of excessive self-indulgence.

For a writer of personal essays, knowing when to write a story is difficult. I am most successful when I am not afraid to write the personal, put the essay down for a time, and then not be afraid to edit the personal. “The Converging of Light” began as an idea to write about iridology; then it became a list of all the infertility treatments I had experienced; finally, I realized (with the help of reader responses) that it was about my relationship with my husband. In order to write a cohesive essay, I deleted several sections that I felt were personally important. I wanted to share them, but they didn’t fit into that particular essay.

The writer must see the finished essay as separate from the original experience. “The writer’s business is to contemplate experience, not to be merged in it,” Flannery O’Connor says. “No art is sunk in the self, but rather, in art the self becomes self-forgetful in order to meet the demands of the thing seen and the thing being made” (82). However, the writer must not make the mistake of separating the text from self before the personal has been

captured on the page. In order to forget the self, the writer must first recognize the self. In personal essay writing, the writer's own life merges with the text on the page.

### **B. Benefits of the personal essay**

Writing honestly about myself does seem more difficult, but that is why I choose to write the personal essay. Along with the danger, it has the greatest potential for helping me to gain an understanding of myself, not only in my writing, but also in life. One of the most irrational aspects of my struggles to have a child has been my response to other women. The more I wrote, the more I wanted to understand my own irrationality. Although this inability to think clearly often initially muddled my writing rather than enhancing it, comments from readers helped me to clarify where I was making sense and where I was letting my own misperceptions run wild.

In order to write "The Converging of Light" and "I Didn't Grow Up in a Desert" I was forced to reconsider the differing positions my husband and I have taken toward infertility. Asking him to respond to my essays opened a dialogue that was both surprising and healthy. Not only did my writing improve, but my marriage has been strengthened. Is it naïve to link the improvement of self with the improvement of writing?

T.S. Eliot argues that the artist should aim to extinguish the self during the act of writing. "What happens is a continual surrender of himself [the artist] as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (43). He advises poets that "the bad [writer] is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him 'personal.' Poetry is not a turning loose of

emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (43).

The act of writing is a surrender, but it also holds the potential for the creation or recreation of personality. Even as we record memories from our own perspective we are changing the past, and changing ourselves. I don’t want writing to become a tool for escaping emotion or myself. Rather, I see personal essay as a way to see the larger world through myself. It is only through embracing those emotions and personalities that the personal essayist can have the “quick access to their blood reactions” that Phillip Lopate praises so highly.

### **C. Successfully writing the personal**

If “personal” is often used as a pejorative description of writing, what devices is the personal essayist left with? Many writers, including essayists, have questioned the validity of Eliot’s outlined boundaries. I cheer every time I read Lopate’s introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*: “The spectacle of baring the naked soul is meant to awaken the sympathy of the reader, who is apt to forgive the essayist’s self-absorption in return for the warmth of his or her candor” (xxvi). Writing the personal does not need to be viewed negatively. Rather, the writer must understand how to write the personal honestly and with candor. Readers respond to details that ring true to the contradictions found in everyday life and to writers who are unafraid to show the full range of human complexity.

After writing “Visiting Ven” I was afraid to show it to anyone who actually knew Ven. Although I tried to be fair in my portrayal of her, I worried that my honesty would be hurtful. I also worried that my essay would appear to be self-absorbed and manipulative.

Was I just using Ven as a convenient vehicle to get my own story told? However, a few weeks after she died I gave a copy to her granddaughter. “You really knew who she was, didn’t you?” she responded. She was grateful for my attempts at candor, and the writing and reading of the essay were healing both for her and for me.

The potential power of the personal essay is a willingness to embrace the personal. I love being admitted into the secret places of others’ lives. I’ve got little smileys and stars around Phillip Lopate’s confession about his first marriage that “I had to continue being a fool because it had been my odd misfortune to have stumbled onto kindness and tranquility too quickly.” Oh the joy—the stab of guilt and recognition that I too, in my immaturity, have failed to appreciate past relationships.

Embracing the personal means a willingness to reveal personal inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies. In “Definitions” I know that my differing attitudes toward the boys’ biological and adoptive mothers are irrational. I feel compassion for Amber, while she consistently makes mistakes that endanger her children. On the other hand, I feel only anger toward their adoptive mother, who provides them with a secure and loving home. Because I did make a positive difference in the lives of our foster boys, it was possible that the essay could become openly self-aggrandizing. I was also concerned that it would become just the opposite—a litany of why I shouldn’t have adopted them, even though I foster parented them well. Rather than proving a point in the essay, I am asking a question: How do I define myself and others as a mother? Through revelation of inconsistencies I can honestly ask the question, without needing to provide an answer that would feel false or too easy.

The choice of particular details in an essay allows the writer to reveal life, even to reveal opinions, without becoming too didactic. My most successful essays let the details tell

the story and sometimes even teach the lesson. When a writer starts an essay trying to moralize, most of the time the writing will fail. When I started writing about infertility, I didn't realize that I wanted to say something about the strength of marriage. After writing several essays, I realized that a common theme kept reoccurring—the interactions between my husband Kevin, and me. When I tried to generalize about my marriage, my essays became bogged down. It is the details that tell the stories of our lives—Kevin's curiosity about the torr pulled by the D&C machine, my fixation with seeing a fetus among all the blood.

For the right details to be chosen, the personal essay must have a life and subject of its own. In talking about writing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard stresses over and over that the subject is very separate from writer. "I knew I wasn't the subject," she says (237). Although I am the main character in all the essays in this thesis, I cannot be the subject. It is not my life that is interesting to readers; it is the places where my life intersects with theirs. Once a writer recognizes those places of intersection, the essay can be rewritten with a focus on the subject. All the intimate details, while still belonging to the life of the personal essayist, now also belong separately to the essay and its subject. This separation of text and life must happen for the essay to become cohesive, but not without recognition that all the interesting details come from a life that matters, that is important to the writer.

Why did it irritate me so much that the doctor and nurse were so anxious for me to put my clothing back on? Maybe because I felt like they wanted to separate the naked body lying on the examining table from the person they chat with about the weather. It is good professional practice for them to separate the body from the person, but I don't want them to

forget that it's a real person lying on the examining table. A good reader separates the writing from the writer, maybe especially a reader reading her own writing. But as a writer of personal essay, the text starts with me, with my thoughts, my feelings, and my experiences. It's *personal!*

## **II. Writing the Body**

For my particular experience, the texts also begin with my body. In her infertility memoir, *The Pregnancy Project: Encounters with Reproductive Therapy*, Karen Propp explains her motivation for writing, "I needed to make sense of what would happen to my body" (36). French feminist theory helps me to make sense of my own texts as I learn, through writing, to make sense of my body. Although French feminism is a broad category, for practical purposes, I will use the writings of Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva to examine the body as identification of the female self, the link between the body and writing, and the role of defining oneself as mother within my essays.

For the major French feminists, the physical body and its drives define the place of women's difference, the place where they can begin to define themselves, rather than being defined by a patriarchal culture. Diane Price Herndl assesses the French feminist movement as "a refusal to accept the traditional Western separation of mind and body. . . first by celebrating woman's association with the body, thereby refusing the subordination of body to mind, and second, by refusing to accept the separation between the two" (343). For French feminists, *l'écriture féminine* comes from the uniquely female body and cannot be separated from it.



Critics of the movement accuse the writing the body theorists of being “too idealist and essentialist, bound up in the very system they claim to undermine” (Jones 374). Focusing only on writing the body is dangerous because identifying and naming the “universal” woman through the biological experiences of a select few white, educated women is not only essentialist but also racist. However, ignoring the role of the female body in writing is also foolhardy. For many women, myself included, the writing of the French feminists provides a framework for understanding the struggles we have with our own bodies. My mind, my scholarship, and my desire to write are inextricably linked to the physical drives, experiences, and limitations of my body.

#### **A. Body as identification of female self**

Most feminist theorists have opposed the linking of women with body because the body has traditionally been a site of oppression for women. These have “resisted a sense of being tied to the biological” (Herndl 344). However, for women suffering from infertility being tied to the biological is a reality. My life, my emotions, even my writing is literally shaped by the biological. According to Cixous, women must write the body in order to reclaim her entire self. “She must write her self. . . by writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her” (50).

For French feminists, those who resist and critique writing the body are oppressive. “The French share a deep critique of the modes through which the West has claimed to discern evidence—or reality—and a suspicion concerning the efforts to change the position of women that fail to address the forces in the body, in the unconscious, in the basic structures of culture that are invisible to the empirical eye” (Jones 370). They argue that

Western thought, by ignoring the physical, supports the repression of women's experience (Jones 370).

Although I agree that realigning women with their physical bodies provides opportunities for oppression or misrepresentation, I felt that until I could be allowed to express some of my physical frustrations I would not be able to fill in important gaps in both my writing and my understanding. While writing "The Converging of Light" I deliberated over including details such as reading scriptures while my husband shone a laser between my legs. Every time I typed the word "clitoris" I hesitated. However, the story remains incomplete without these physical details. For me it was important to show my discomfort and perhaps even make the reader a little uncomfortable in order to articulate the changing relationship of myself with my body and of myself with my husband. To not be able to write this story would have been oppressive.

One of the traditional oppressions of women has been control over their sexuality and expressions of that sexuality. While trying to have a baby, I allowed others to define my sexuality and ability to reproduce. I was asked how many times a week I engaged in intercourse, with how many people previous to my husband. Several doctors and even well-meaning neighbors recommended intercourse positions and timing in order to maximize my potential for getting pregnant. One day while lying on my back, my legs in stirrups, an ultrasound probe in my vagina, I realized the irony in my doctor's hopeful assurance that he could get me pregnant. The sense of helplessness was not how I had envisioned my sexual life. Although I had chosen to come to the myriad appointments, I had not counted on my sexuality being redefined.

In her memoir, Karen Propp recognizes that she is being redefined in someone else's terms. "After my first consultation with an infertility specialist, I understood that whereas I had once been a woman with a head and a body, limbs and a lover, I was now a patient comprised of ovary, uterus, and female hormones. . . Reduced to a two centimeter egg follicle on an ultrasound screen, I couldn't exist anywhere" (4).

Because I chose to continue with infertility treatments, I needed a way to gain back a sense of control over my own body and over what I felt about myself as a woman and as a sexual being. Irigaray and Cixous believe that in order to discover and express themselves, women must begin with their sexuality, a sexuality that "begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal differences from men" (Jones 374). Although there is very little in my essays that is explicitly sexual, as I felt free to write about my body I began to perceive myself as creative and productive, in both body and writing. In taking what I perceived to be my failure (infertility) and using it to express myself, I began to reclaim my right to define myself as a woman.

### **B. The link between the body and writing**

One reason the French feminists want women to write the body is because for them sexuality is strongly linked to textuality. An early draft of "Learning to Create" was the first infertility essay that I wrote. I had not yet read the writings of Cixous and Irigaray, but I knew I wanted to write an essay that linked artistic and literary creation with physical creation. Karen Propp writes, "And as I wrote a funny thing happened: my desire for a child grew and grew until I felt I could no longer live and die without a child to raise in the world and leave behind" (11). For me as the desire to have a child grew, my desire to write grew.

Resisting oppression in the literary realm also means resisting oppression in the physical realm. Not only do I not want my doctor to define me, but I also do not want to be defined by what men have traditionally written about women, in either content or form.

While a distinctly feminine language is hard to define, the French feminists encourage women to attempt to write from their bodies in order to begin to invent a language that “does not contain. . . does not hold back, [that] makes possible” (Cixous 358). One unifying tenet of French feminists is the resistance to women being labeled as the ones who lack. Through writing women can redefine themselves as women, as sexual beings in and of themselves, not just as “a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of male fantasies” (Irigaray 364).

Large portions of each of these essays have been written while I was literally waiting for test results, recovering from miscarriages and operations, and researching new options. Feeling sick often contributed to typos and sloppy sentences. My charged emotional state clouded my judgment while writing overly sentimental passages. However, the successful moments, the candid details that strengthen the essays also exist because I was constantly aware of the physicality of my body as I wrote.

As I became aware my own body, I also began to notice the bodies of other women. Although not sexual, many of the connections that I make between Ven and myself in “Visiting Ven” are physical. First, I describe my own miscarriage “I bled for a day, but saved all the evidence. Before we went in for the D and C, I made Kevin sift through the little pile of bloody pads I left on the bathroom counter. I wanted to know if there was anything solid there. Where is the body?” In the next paragraph, I am peering through the Moons’ front door, literally looking for Ven’s body hunched over the kitchen counter. Physicality and

touch suddenly becomes important in our relationship as we are two women contemplating our personal responses to life and death. I wanted to understand other women, how they felt in similar and different ways than I did.

### **C. Defining oneself as mother**

Several questions that I kept returning to as I wrote my essays were “What does it mean to be a mother? For me? For other women? What does it mean for women who are not mothers either by choice or by circumstance? Defining oneself as a mother is problematic, and the maternal metaphor used by the French feminists to categorize all women is restrictive. However, in my own life at least, the attempts to define the maternal and the feminine keep intersecting. Not all women are mothers, will be, can be, or even want to be. But how we and others view ourselves as interacting within, without, or somewhere along the boundary of the role of motherhood is an inescapable part of being a woman.

The French feminists claim that motherhood is one of the domains defined by patriarchal culture that need to be reclaimed. Cixous links the gestational drive to the sexual drive and encourages women to express each of the drives they feel, including the maternal. “We’re not going to repress something so simple as the desire for life. Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive—all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood” (359). According to Irigaray “maternity fills the gaps in a repressed female sexuality” (365). The French feminists argue that only through women redefining motherhood for themselves can the problems of oppression associated with women and childbearing be rectified. They not only argue for a celebration of the gestational drive, but

they also want to use the maternal metaphor as descriptive of all women, whether biologically mothers or not.

Because motherhood has been used by men to commodify women and control the “production” of society, critics of the French feminists are especially bothered by the maternal metaphor. They warn that “the moment the maternal emerges as a new dominance, it must be put into question before it congeals as feminine essence, as unchanging in-difference” (Miller 174). Christiane Makward asserts that “the [French] theory of femininity is dangerously close to recreating in ‘deconstructive’ language the traditional assumptions on femininity and female creativity” (qtd. in Stanton 174).

Kristeva recognizes that there has been a backlash against aligning the maternal with feminism: “The desire to be a mother, considered alienating and even reactionary by the preceding generation of feminists, has obviously not become a standard for the present generation” (872). However, she sees change on the horizon:

We have seen in the past few years an increasing number of women who do not only consider their maternity compatible with their professional life or their feminist involvement . . . but also find it indispensable to their discovery, not of the plenitude, but of the complexity of the female experience, with all that this complexity comprises in joy and pain.” (872)

Discovering the complexity of my own views of motherhood has been one of the most productive results of writing this collection of essays. Within the world of infertility, women constantly define themselves and each other through biology and where they are along their respective journeys to motherhood. Often this categorizing is hurtful and

isolating. In my essays I'm interested in examining both how other women define me as a mother or not-mother and how I also intentionally and unintentionally assign labels.

In "An Understanding Heart" I ask, "What makes someone a mother?" Although I never really answer the question, I explore different kinds of mothers. In "Definitions" I make connections among a biological mother, a foster mother, and an adoptive mother. "An Understanding Heart" allows me to try to understand the motivations of two biblical mothers, myself, and contemporary women in my neighborhood. Throughout my essays I'm trying to decide whether or not I can define myself within the maternal realm and what it is that keeps driving me toward motherhood. In "An Understanding Heart" and "Definitions" I confront my hesitation to adopt, the private fear that perhaps I'm not worthy to be called a mother, and the judgments that I carry over to other women.

As I make judgments I worry that I am guilty of categorizing women by defining them in respect to their motherhood. However, I cannot disentangle my writing or my life from either the issue of motherhood or from the physicality of my body. Recreating myself, recreating the definition of at least one woman is a highwire walk; I am caught between the world of mother and not-mother. Writing about my own body carries implicit assumptions that I subconsciously assign to other women. However, I hope, by using the personal essay as a medium that I can write my own body in a way that encourages other women to write theirs. I hope, at least within moments of my essays, to have the body of my writing and the writing of my body become the twining of texts that the French feminists envisioned. Like Karen Propp I feel that "I have become the text of my blood cells and the script of my hormones" (70).

### **III. Conclusion**

I have been deeply moved and personally changed by writers who are willing to include themselves and their bodies in their own writing. Even in fiction, I find that often the parts of a book that impact me the most are the sections that I later find out are largely autobiographical. On the other hand, I'm not a big fan of "true to life inspiring stories" that read like plot novels. It's not the "true story" I'm so addicted to, but the tangible presence of the author within the text. I'm interested in the person, the life, not just the words on a printed page.

Although the essays now live on their own, they are also an extension of my life, an expression of who I am. I'm both Ven's buddy and the woman who resents visiting her. I'm a foster mother, but not an adoptive mother. At times I am a good friend; other times I am disloyal. Hopefully, readers of these essays will begin to see me as a person, with all my complexities. Hopefully, the essays will also help them to glimpse parts of their own humanity as well.

Ralph Ellison claims that all writers make a choice about their own writing:

We select neither our parents, our race nor our nation; these occur to us out of the love, the hate, the circumstances, the fate, of others. But we do become writers out of an act of will, out of an act of choice; a dim confused oftentimes regrettable choice, perhaps, but choice nevertheless. And what happens thereafter causes all those experiences which occurred before we began to function as writers to take on a special quality of uniqueness. If this does not happen then as far as writing goes, the experiences have been misused. If we do not make of them a value, if we do not



transform them into forms and images of meaning which they did not possess before, then we have failed as artists. (146)

In writing this thesis I'm attempting to make a choice, about myself as an individual, as a woman, and as a member of a larger society. Admittedly there are moments that I fail at understanding and communicating the meaning of my own experience. My writing, like my body and my life, often breaks down and becomes messy. It's nakedness all over again, but I refuse to put all my clothes back on until I've discovered what it is I want to say.

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## Visiting Ven

“They think I don’t believe, in God and all that. But, I do. I’ve been praying a lot more lately. I just can’t believe that we live after dying.” Ven confessed this to me, in the Moons’ large kitchen, full of sun-warmed wood cabinets and counters. She was eating a bowl of oatmeal I had just finished helping her to prepare. “I can’t believe that we will all see each other after. I think it would be nice to believe; I just can’t. But, I know you believe it.”

*Do I?*

“My son and I don’t believe it. We think it is something that man made up. Marilee, Warren, the kids, they believe it, but I don’t. They tell me I need to have faith.”

*Faith? My parents taught me about faith—the “substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” But it’s hard to keep hoping when no evidence is forthcoming, so now I keep asking myself: What about “seeing is believing”?*

I’ve been visiting teaching Ven for almost two years now, but this is the first conversation we’ve had about God. I’m always afraid to say much; Ven’s granddaughter, Marilee has warned me against preaching. According to Marilee, several other visiting teachers got friendly and then tried sneaking in a little gospel message. After Ven gave them an earful, they never came back.

Ven has lived for the past five years with her granddaughter Marilee Moon, Marilee's husband, and four kids. The Moons attend the same congregation I do, the Spring Creek Fifth Ward, and I'm officially assigned to give monthly visits to the adult women in the family—an informal chat with a brief spiritual message. Kim Hatch, who lives around the corner with her husband and eight-month-old baby, is my companion. She usually comes with me on our visits to Marilee. I give the message, and Marilee and Kim talk about babies and raising children. For Ven's visit, I always come alone.

Although her hearing is going, Ven's mind is still sharp, and she's a voracious reader. I love to talk about books and to listen to stories about the olden days, so we've formed a friendship of sorts. But today's conversation is unfamiliar territory--I don't know how to talk to Ven about religion. I don't even know how to talk to God anymore. "Bear your testimony when someone brings up doubts," I've been taught. But all I have today is more questions; Ven's questions are uncomfortable--not so different from the ones I've been afraid to ask.

"Ven, It's hard to believe things you can't see, isn't it?"

*A woman in the ward told me that after her miscarriage she saw her baby in the temple as a grown man. Another woman told me that losing her baby was an incredible faith building experience for her. How am I supposed to feel about that? I'm not saying that I discount miracles—I wasn't there--but what do I do with other people's stories that don't make sense? That maybe even feel like fanciful lies? Lately all I feel in the temple is emptiness, a sense that You are out there but that we are no longer on speaking terms. Could You give me a little solid evidence I can hold onto?*

I watch Ven grasping the spoon and bringing it to her mouth. Her hands shake a little, and a small blob of oatmeal falls off the spoon and lands on her chin. I'm glad that I came today. In the past, I've only come the required once or twice a month. I know the visit will last for over an hour. (Ven gets mad if I don't stay long enough.) So, I haven't come as often as my guilty conscience urges. I'd already been this month—took her a little pot of primroses for her birthday—but Marilee said Ven could really use another visit. Lately, Ven has been too afraid to get out of bed, and I recognize the signs of exhaustion in Marilee's face and voice. I know that I can come more often and usually genuinely enjoy my visits with Ven. I look at my calendar and block in Ven's name for Tuesday mornings.

*I think this is what I'm supposed to be doing. Going on with living in the face of death? Isn't part of the grieving process affirming life? Lots of lives? More lives than just my own?*

Ven says that she wishes it were just hip and leg pain again. The nervous attacks are worse, a terrible reason to be stuck in bed. Back in the eighties, when she was dealing with the physical pain, the doctor gave her a bunch of prescription pills that didn't seem to work. Her daughter, an herbal nutritionist, began giving her a combination of herbs and vitamins. Within a few months, Ven was up and moving again--the leg pain gone. "I don't see doctors anymore," she tells me. "My daughter has kept me alive for the last twenty years on natural herbs alone. I'd be long gone if my daughter hadn't intervened."

"It's amazing what herbs can do. Your daughter sounds very good at what she does."

"She is. Maybe too good. Sometimes I wish she hadn't kept me alive this long."

*What is it that sustains life? What begins it? Even the church materials aren't certain or clear on when life begins. Only stillborn children are clearly promised in church doctrine to be raised by the parents. Are my little half-formed babies in an endless loop of reincarnation, as some would suggest? Did they, the "most valiant of spirits" come to earth only for a brief time to gain a body as others tell me? If so, why aren't they real to me? Why don't I have anything to touch or to hold? Why, even when I was pregnant, did I never feel like they were real? I was surprised by the uncontrollable rush of liquid when my water broke this last time, while I was sitting on the couch watching a movie. I bled for a day, but saved all the evidence. Before we went in for the D and C, I made Kevin sift through the little pile of bloody pads I left on the bathroom counter. I wanted to know if there was anything solid there. Where is the body?*

When I first arrived this morning, I couldn't see Ven through the etched-glass flowers of the Moons' front door. Usually, I see her bent over the kitchen table—her regular station during the day. I rang the doorbell five times and nobody answered, but I knew she must be home. She doesn't ever leave the house anymore. Last Christmas she went to her daughter's house across town for the first time in four years. Ven told me she doesn't think she'll ever do that again.

"Hello. Hello!" I hollered into the house, half-afraid of what I might find.

"Who's there? Who is it?" Relieved to hear her voice, I beelined for her bedroom and found her lying in bed, the covers bunched up at her feet, her purple fleece nightgown a tent around her frail frame. The old black-and-white pictures I've seen of Ven show a young woman, slender and beautiful, with thick lustrous hair. Now she's so thin that the extra skin



lies in folds upon her face and arms. But, there is still something startling beautiful about her piercing blue eyes, as if they by sheer willpower diminish the betrayal of the wrinkled and mottled skin.

“Didn’t wake you up did I?” I know she hasn’t been sleeping well. It is 11:00 am, but sometimes she does sleep in pretty late.

“Do I look like it?”

“Of course not. You look great.”

*I have never noticed how swollen her ankles and shins were before, purple and cracking. How did she survive this long? A scared but spunky teenager, leaving home in rural Wyoming for the lights and sounds of Salt Lake City. Ironing a rich woman's clothes to pay for secretarial school. Falling in love with the dashing railroad man who took her to see the wonders of Los Angeles and Chicago. Learning to fear him when the alcohol ran thick. Surviving him. Living for a few years with a daughter who was difficult to understand and now a granddaughter who is so weary. How did she do it? I feel so tired at 28, with a four-bedroom house and a husband who bearhugs me every day when he comes home from work.*

Ven’s a bit miffed that I seem to doubt that she was really awake. “I wasn’t sleeping, although I am tired. I couldn’t sleep at all last night.”

*Last night I woke up again with the blankets twisted around me and my right leg stuck to the plastic mattress cover. I guess I yanked the bottom sheet off again. Every night, I re-secure the sheets, but usually by morning at least one corner has been pulled off. Kevin’s sleeping*

*with ear plugs these days—orange foam fluorescent ones. For the first time in our marriage I'm snoring loudly every night. Kevin says that sometimes I even mumble or shout. I keep asking him if he wants me to sleep in the guestroom so that he gets a better night's rest. I am relieved by his constant refusals to leave me alone at night; I am hungry for the comfort.*

“I've been lying here starving. Could you help me get some oatmeal?” I offer to let Ven stay in the bedroom, while I go and fix it. But, she wants us to go into the kitchen together. She wants to walk over to the stove with my hands on her arm and back. “So you can see how much I have to do to make breakfast,” she tells me. “You need to be ready to catch me if I fall.” I start by placing my hands along each side, under her arms. No, no. She wants my hands on her arm. I imagine her slipping—the wrench of her arm as it tries to hold up her weight. But, I don't really think she'll fall. I put my left hand on her left arm. I put my right hand on her back, ready to slide around her waist, just in case.

It is strange, this touching. Usually, when I visit we don't touch much. Sometimes I try a hug at the end, but Ven rarely gives much of a response. “Not much of a hugger,” she says. So lately I have been trying the quick, sly elbow touches and shoulder brushes that work best with prickly teenagers. Now, she wants this contact, asks me to move closer to her, so I'm bumped right up against her walker. I spread my fingers across her back for more body contact, greater surface area. She smiles. Every inch counts now.

*I keep reading in the grieving literature about women holding little stiff, dead babies, sometimes only three inches long. Kevin says that as the anesthetic was wearing off I kept repeating things over and over. Mostly, I wanted to know if he could see anything that*

*looked like a baby. “It should be two to two and a half inches,” I told him. As they vacuumed me out, a screen at the top of the machine caught all the solids in a little hopper. This they sent to the laboratory. I went to pick up the report myself—“the specimen consists of multiple pink-tan fragments of tissue. Some of the tissue fragments appear to be membranous and spongiotic, however, no embryonic parts are identified.” Kevin says he never saw anything. Where did it go? Was it real? We saw a heartbeat at 6 weeks. The first one I’ve seen in all three pregnancies. It was the first time I felt like I could hope. I haven’t forgotten the blessing I received six months ago. I was promised a baby--soon. I thought maybe You were just a little off in Your timing. “Soon” can be interpreted in so many ways. I know, I know. I’ve heard that “a day to the Lord is a thousand years to us,” but I keep hoping You’ll speak to me in a way that I can understand. Don’t You have anything tangible for me to hold on to?*

Ven clings to her walker as we move down the hall to the kitchen. I can see the top of Ven’s head, a careful part dividing short white hairs that are coarse and fierce, standing out perpendicular to her head in a rooster tail. We navigate around the bar in the center of the kitchen and arrive at the stove. “Grab on tighter,” she directs, lifting her left arm and beginning heavy rasping. A gasp and a word. A gasp and a word. “I’m . . . so . . . afraid. . . I’ll . . . fall.” I clench down on her arm and wonder if I am leaving bruises.

We stand for a minute or two in the echoes of Ven’s rasping before she’s ready for the two steps to the sink. The pot is in the bottom of the sink—from an earlier failed attempt this morning she tells me. The one before she got up the nerve to head for the bathroom, where she sat in terror for another 30 minutes, paralyzed on the toilet.

She rinses the pan out twice. Two steps back to the stove. For me it's practically a spin and pirouette. The number ten can of oatmeal--part of the family's food storage-- is on the counter next to the stove. Two scoops into the pot. Then over to the fridge for the soymilk. After a heave on the fridge door, the milk is within easy reach. The family knows to place it on the far right on the top shelf. Ven needs another rest.

*Even the daily activities are difficult—walking to class, remembering to return phone calls, bathing. This lethargy and exhaustion are normal all the books say. “Women who are grieving the loss of a baby may feel disoriented and often lose sense of time.” Last week after my first class I left the classroom and was headed to the car before I realized that I was supposed to stay for the second class. Sometimes when I'm driving I forget where I'm going. At stoplights I close my eyes and gingerly push on my eyelids. The sockets feel stretched and bruised. I constantly feel like I need a nap, but I don't have time. I wonder how Marilee, Ven's granddaughter, gets everything done with a grandmother, four kids, and a husband to take care of. In many ways Ven's death will come as a blessing. Marilee tells me she feels guilty for even thinking this. I too, guiltily wonder if Ven's death would not be a blessing. I'm ashamed to think that it would give me an extra hour and a half each week, but I still think it. Even Ven thinks it. Why doesn't anybody talk about these things?*

We pause again for a breather. “Warren said he would fix me oatmeal this morning, but I told him not to. I was afraid he would get it started and then go to work. Maybe I wouldn't be able to make it out to the kitchen to turn off the stove.” Her rasping begins again, thick and rattling. “He and Marilee are really sweet, but sometimes I think that they

wish I had never come. When I first came to live with them I would cook meals and sweep the kitchen, but now I can't do any of those things. I think they don't want me here anymore."

*It's been weeks since I've cooked a real meal. Usually, I defrost something from the freezer—leftovers from a big pot of chili or split pea soup I made last month. Kevin's been eating a lot of Ramen noodles when I don't feel like eating. For lunch I drive through McDonald's, even though it doesn't taste good, and then stuff the greasy bag under the seat of my car. Kevin worries when he sees the fast-food sacks in the back seat. The crumpled bags are a sign of my depression. If I hide them, he won't know to worry.*

"I know that Marilee really loves you." I tell her, and it's true. "She does get overwhelmed, but it's because she's concerned about you. She wants to be able to do more than she is doing."

"I hope I don't give her the nervous attacks. I remember having them when I was a young mother. It happened right after my son was born. They took me to the state mental hospital in Laramie. My sister came and visited me, and I told her to tell my husband to get me home. I had two little kids to get home to. "

"Must have been scary."

"They gave me shock treatments. I was hopeful it would work, that after the treatment I would be able to be like everyone else, so I agreed to go. But, all the patients said that the two doctors went into town every night to drink and party. I couldn't sleep all night,

thinking about how they would be drunk when they came in the next morning to give me my treatments. I was afraid that they wouldn't know when to turn off the machines.”

Ven's being more open than she ever has been before. I feel selfish keeping my own fears silent, so I tell her. “I hate to be afraid. I feel like right now I might be going a little crazy, too. A month ago I lost a baby.” No response.

“After my husband got me out of the crazy hospital, I went home and saw a therapist. Not the kind that keeps you loopy on drugs. He mostly talked to me. He did give me a little bottle of pills. I kept them for a long time so that I could take them out and look at the bottle and say ‘I don't need you anymore.’ This happened in July. I got better, but every July for a few more years I would get very nervous.”

*July? Last summer, I would be driving along to work in the morning and my heart would start to pound for no reason, and I would suddenly realize that this must be what it feels like to have a nervous breakdown. But I am in control of my life. Nervous breakdowns only happen to people who can't pull themselves together. Sweaty hands, beating heart. Maybe my thyroid medication dosage is too high, but I haven't been taking it—too stressed out to remember. I kept wondering if You could hear me—driving down the highway like that-- since my eyes weren't closed and my arms weren't folded. I turned off the radio, just in case. Finally, I made an appointment with a therapist. He told me that I was reacting very normally to delayed grief. Can't I do anything about this feeling?*

I tell Ven that it is surprising how common it is to feel out of control and frightened like this. I tell her that I felt that way last summer when I was on fertility hormones. I keep

trying to share, make her feel better, less of an oddity, but she doesn't see the connection. I am both ashamed and annoyed as she launches into a description of a Danielle Steele book she is reading. Apparently the heroine is trying to have a baby but goes crazy from all the drugs she is taking. Ven wants to tell me all the details of how this fictional woman slowly loses her mind.

*Am I crazy or unfair to compare my own pain with Ven's? But, doesn't my grief count for anything? Will either of us get any comfort from You? My first miscarriage (six weeks), I didn't even know I was pregnant until all the blood and cramping arrived. My second pregnancy (eight weeks) I wanted to hope, but I never really felt like it would happen. But, the third--my doctor promised that I just had to make it two more weeks until Christmas to be well out of the first trimester--I saw the heartbeat. Wasn't that tangible proof that there was a life? A sign that I was doing something right?*

Ven is ready to return to the oatmeal making, and I'm feeling confident that I know what to do to help. She turns to ignite the stove and has to rise up on her tippy-toes. I keep my hand on her back with pressure. Wrong thing to do.

"Don't push. Don't push!" I tell her I'm sorry and that I'm glad whenever she tells me what she would like me to be doing or not doing.

"I know I can tell you that, Naomi. You're my buddy. Sometimes people are too afraid to try."

*Did You hear that? I can do this. Maybe next month, next year I won't be afraid to try for life, for hope.*

“But. . .”

*Whoops. False confidence.*

“When you are right next to me, you don't need to talk so loudly. I can't hear out of one ear, but this one is just fine.”

*Is that why she always rubs her right ear, every time I've come over for the last two years?*

We head back to the kitchen table and Ven takes a seat. She lets me get up alone and stir the oatmeal a few times until it's bubbling. I am careful to follow her instructions.

“Don't stir it too much. Be careful when you pour it into the bowl. Is the stove turned off? Make sure the pot is in the sink. With water in it. Up to the brim.” Once she has her oatmeal, we chat for a few more minutes before it's time for me to leave for class. She tells me funny stories about what McKenzie, Marilee's five-year-old daughter says. “McKenzie says ‘Great-grandma, when you get to heaven, I bet you'll get to eat a lot.’” We both laugh.

“Naomi.” She grabs my hand and I look at the odd angle of her withered fingers, slanting down from the knuckles, the veins a system of tributaries outlined on a relief map. “I need to tell you something. When I finally made it from the bathroom to the bedroom I



was terrified. I was starving, but I knew I couldn't make it back into the kitchen." She squeezes my knuckles so hard they rub together.

*They were so tiny in my palm, those little clay feet that Sister Hoffman showed me after this last miscarriage. When she had her sixth loss, they took the baby's feet and made little molds—something for her to take home. She invited me over to show me her special baby box and give me some literature on grieving. I don't know how she still stands upright after six cycles of death, but she also has seven healthy and strong children—the oldest going on a mission soon. I sometimes sit in the back of Relief Society, looking at the heads of all the women and wonder about their private griefs.*

Ven's face is intense, vulnerable. "I was so frightened, lying in my bed all alone. All I could cry out was, 'God help me!' and then I heard you coming into the house."

## Definitions

*\Fos"ter\, adj. indicates that the person so called stands in the relation of parent, child, brother, etc., as regards sustenance and nurture, but not by tie of blood.*

His mother didn't want me to cut his hair. It was just like his dad's (light brown and shiny, when clean). The ends came down to his collar, and the rat's tail in the middle hung to his shoulder blades. He was four and fully decked out in Harley Davidson leather. His parents bought it for his birthday when the SSI check arrived. Since they were living in their car, there was no rent to pay. All a 1971 Monte Carlo needs is gas, and not even that if you park it. Child Protective Services decided that winter without housing posed too great a risk for a four-year-old and his brothers, ages three and one and a half. Even in our warm house, I was constantly wiping their runny noses.

The oldest loved motorcycles and wore his leather jacket whenever I would let him. He cried when I told him he couldn't take it in the bathtub. His three-year-old brother never cried, except in his sleep. When Will, his biological dad, yelled at him during visits, his face would go blank, like the white mask of a mime. It frightened me and when we returned home I would play "Frosty the Snowman," his favorite song, over and over again on the CD player until he smiled. The youngest loved to jump and climb. He'd scale the piano and bookshelves and squeeze through the patio slats to hang out over the backyard. He slept in a crib, but sometimes he'd escape and I'd find him sleeping on the floor beside his brothers' beds.

They stayed with us five months. We were only cleared to take in two children, but it was Thanksgiving and no one else had the time—too many family gatherings for the

holidays. Kevin and I were trying to have children of our own, but we were becoming frustrated with repeat failures. We thought foster parenting would be a good way to prepare us for children and to help remind us that we weren't the only people in the world with problems. When the call came asking us to take the boys, I was excited. I'd been waiting a long time to use my parenting skills.

For the first month they would cry at night and fall out of their beds. I'd wake up and hold them and sing the lullaby my mother used to sing to me. Sometimes I'd sing "Lullaby and good night and with roses sleep tight" twenty-five times until they would fall back asleep. The second month they slept, except for the three-year-old who would sometimes quietly smear his diaper on the wall. "Fecal smearing is normal," the caseworker told me. "They've been in and out of foster care and are confused."

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*\Fos"ter\, v.t. to help to develop; stimulate; promote; as, hunger fosters disease.*

Their parents found jobs and a low-rent apartment. They sold their car for one month's rent. Every week I would take the boys to visit them, usually at McDonalds. I would give their parents \$10 to buy hamburgers for themselves and the kids. I'd been reading literature on foster children. Unless they are in a severely abusive situation, most therapists now believe that foster children actually do better when kept with their biological parents. Sometimes when I was shopping, people in the grocery store would stop and tell me, "Such beautiful boys. They have your blue eyes." I loved it; it scared me. The

caseworker told me that their parents were working hard to prepare for the boys' return.

Although I wanted to be, I was not the mother. Amber was. I decided to prepare them to go home to her.

Christy, their caseworker, gave me the names of all agencies I could call. "The boys are certainly eligible for help," she said. "We think their mom possibly took drugs during all three pregnancies, and all of the boys have been diagnosed with learning disabilities." I called Kids Who Count, a state agency designed to help kids catch up. I enrolled the four-year-old in Head Start. I wanted him to fit in. I was embarrassed by his hair and thought he might get teased, so I trimmed the back and cut off the rat's tail. When I went to pick him up, the teachers told me what a great job I was doing. "You can hardly tell he's a foster child. You must be doing something right."

When his parents saw the haircut they were silent at first, touching his hair and the back of his bald neck. "It's the only thing we asked of her," Will, his dad, said to Amber, as if I weren't standing right there. I felt the shame rise red up my face and pretended I couldn't hear them. That night they called the caseworker and complained. "Don't worry," she later told me. "I backed you up. I told them that you are the foster parent and can do whatever will make life easier for you. They can always grow out his hair again when he goes home."

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*Foster. Synonyms: nurture, cultivate, nurse. These verbs mean to promote and sustain the growth and development of: nurturing hopes; cultivating tolerance; foster friendly relations; nursed the fledgling business.*

For Christmas the state sent us extra money for gifts. We didn't expect it and had been saving up to buy gifts for the boys ourselves. We received special permission for the boys to spend Christmas Day with their parents, so the first week in December I took Will and Amber to Wal-Mart with the state money. They walked up and down the toy aisles and pushed all the buttons on all the toys, choosing the noisiest ones for their sons. A few times they asked my opinion. Mostly, I stayed quiet and pushed the cart.

The joint shopping trip improved relations and the boys' parents began talking to me at the weekly visits. Amber and Will also seemed pleased that the boys called Kevin and me by our first names, rather than Mommy and Daddy. When they first came to our house the oldest asked me "Are you Mommy?" Because they'd been in and out of foster homes, the kids had called several people "Mommy." I showed him a picture of Amber and Will and explained that they were his Mommy and Daddy, but that Kevin and I were friends to help love him and keep him safe for awhile. He could call us by our names or Mommy and Daddy if he wanted to. He seemed relieved by this explanation.

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*From Old English fostren, f[=o]ster, f[=o]stor, food, nourishment, f[=o]da food.*

When the boys first came to live with us all three would eat until I told them the meal was over. They ate brown rice and kale, wheat germ pancakes and spinach—whatever I fed them. Some foster children hoard food under their beds. My three boys were like camels, storing all they could in their bodies until the next meal. The youngest was the first to start

refusing green vegetables. He'd become round and chubby at our house. When he pushed away his broccoli, I hugged him and cried.

By the third month the oldest was potty-trained, and the three-year-old was wearing pull-ups. All three were sleeping through the night. Amber began bringing me food from the county food pantry for the boys: boxes of granola, strawberry jello, cans of applesauce. "I know the boys love this stuff. You can eat some too, if you want. I get all this stuff for free." She told me that that her oldest loved Pokemon. My husband, Kevin, took him to the movie. "I think it was a little too violent for a four-year-old," he said when they got home. "I'm surprised you let me take him."

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*\Fos"ter\, v.t. To cherish; to promote the growth of; to encourage; to sustain and promote; as, to foster genius.*

Kids Who Count finally finished all the paperwork and came to the house to test the boys. "They aren't eligible any more. They've caught up in all areas with their age group." Their caseworker was delighted with the news. Kevin and I took the boys to Chuckie Cheese to celebrate. We took lots of pictures and ordered double prints for their parents.

By the fourth month all of us were pretty comfortable. The parents still had jobs and an apartment. Amber woke up early to bake bread at a local bakery, and Will traveled around the state with a team of oven hood cleaners. All of their drug tests had come back negative, and Will signed up for anger management classes. They were close to completing

the judges' list of requirements. Although they sold their car, they never missed a visit. If they didn't have the money for a bus pass, they'd walk the six miles to McDonald's. When I went to pick up the boys after a visit, all three would run and jump in my arms ready to go home. Amber and Will seemed glad to see me. They'd report on any new scabs or scrapes the boys got from running in the play area. Nobody cried after visits anymore.

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*\Fos"ter\, v.t. To nurse; cherish; foster a secret hope.*

At the end of the fourth month, I received a call from Christy, the caseworker. "They've both lost their jobs and have been kicked out of their apartment. The kids are too young to stay in foster care much longer. The judge wants this resolved." At the next visit, Amber told me, "We had to get our dog out of the pound. How could we pay rent?" She showed me pictures of their new entertainment center. Did I know you could rent cool stuff like that? She gave me a poem she'd written for the boys. It was hand-written with coffee stains on the bottom. She signed it: "MOMMY LOVES YOU. ALL GOOD NIGHT. GO TO SLEEP." I made copies and hung it by their beds. Sometimes I'd read it to them as a bedtime story.

Along with their mother's poem, we hung pictures, near each of the boy's beds. At foster parent training the social worker encouraged us to give kids coping mechanisms for dealing with fear at night, including having accessible biological family photographs. When they were afraid we encouraged our boys to hug their special stuffed animal, touch the snapshots of themselves and their parents taped to the wall, or pray. We made extra copies

of snapshots that they could hold and smudge. Amber and Will gave us a framed family portrait and we hung that higher up on the wall, next to a stylized colored pencil drawing of a smiling Jesus with children.

One afternoon I discovered the framed picture of their parents had been pulled off the wall and left under a pile of clothes on the floor. Fearing they would cut themselves if it was taken down again and the glass broken I rehung it, clearly in view, but much higher this time, out of reach. Thinking they wanted to see their parents close up, I added a few more snapshots of themselves and their parents down low on the walls next to each of their beds. A few days later, I noticed most of the snapshots had been taken down, crumpled, and written on. We expected that from kids and were not alarmed. What I didn't notice was the missing picture of their parents from the wall, until I found the four year old lying in his bed chanting our names, "Kevin and Naomi" over and over again as he ripped the picture of his parents to shreds. I hid around the corner listening and watching until he finally fell asleep. Quietly, I went in and gathered up the torn pieces and found the shards of glass and the broken frame lying on the floor in a strangely ordered pile. I checked his hands for cuts, then tried to reassemble the torn pieces of the picture, but found that the parents' faces were scratched out beyond all recognition. The faces of the children were intact.

My surety that returning home was the best solution for our foster boys began to waver. I imagined the boys as teenagers, as grown men. Would they continue to flourish under our care? What were the practical implications of raising three children who had been so emotionally damaged as young children? But how could I let them go now after all this work?

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*Foster, Stephen Collins. American songwriter whose popular works, such as “Oh! Susannah” (1848), reflect the sentiment of pre-Civil War America.*

*It rained so hard the other night the weather it was dry.*

*The sun so hot I froze to death, Susannah don't you cry.*

Christy, the caseworker, asked if we'd like to adopt the boys. I told her I'd consider it. Even though I was exhausted, I wanted them. Kevin said that it was my decision. We said nothing to the boys. When the court date arrived, Amber asked me if I'd go with her. She wore a sleeveless dress with faded sunflowers on it. Her hair was brushed but still hung orange and stringy, three inches of dark roots showing. Will, the boys' dad, came, too. He said nothing in court, but sat beside Amber slumped in his chair, head down. Sitting behind him, I noticed he'd cut his hair to look just like his oldest son's. I told him it looked nice; I wished I had had the courage to apologize for the first haircut.

When the judge asked the parents to make a statement, Amber stood, strangely elegant, with her bony arms raised. “Your honor, they are my children. Please. I love them.” She sagged into her chair worn out, the grace gone. As the judge announced his intent to sever parental rights, I felt weary, guilty, implicated. Standing outside the courthouse, Amber continued to cry, “Doesn't he know I'm their mother?” I didn't try to answer, but that afternoon I called Christy. “We've decided it's too much for us to take in three boys permanently, but we'll be happy to keep them until you find an adoptive placement.” Logically I knew that the kids would be better off in a more stable home, but I couldn't shake the feeling that if I chose to adopt them I would always feel like I had

betrayed their mother. I didn't know if I could ever believe that I had the right to claim Amber's place. Perhaps I was afraid of not knowing the answer to the question "Why?" they would eventually ask.

At the end of the fifth month we helped them with the transition into a permanent home. Their adoptive mother was plump and motherly. At her house they ate fruit snacks and watched *Veggie Tales*. She made job charts and taught them how to make their beds. They went camping with their new dad. "It's time for them to start a new life," their adoptive mother said. "We don't want any contact with the biological parents." I was angry and wanted to protest, but I stayed silent. I wanted her to have to at least meet Amber and Will, to face them. But they weren't the only ones with whom she wanted to cut ties. She didn't want me to visit either. "It's just too hard for all of us. Naomi, they cry every time you leave. If you just disappear, they'll forget you and move on." I didn't agree, but it was her right to set the boundaries, I knew. She was now their mother, something I never allowed myself to be.

## An Understanding Heart

In First Kings 3:9 Solomon asks the Lord to bless him with an “understanding heart to judge [his] people.” After the Lord grants him his request, the Bible recounts the story of the dispute between two women over a baby. Two women live together; both have children. In the night one of the babies dies. Allegedly the mother of the dead child switches the babies so that she now has the live child. The women come before Solomon, both claiming to be the mother of the live child. Solomon threatens to cut the living baby in half, giving each mother her share. One of the women agrees to this arrangement. The other begs Solomon not to kill the child and offers to give the baby to the other woman. Solomon awards the child to the mother willing to give him up to save his life, declaring, “She is his mother.”

As I read this story and various interpretations of the story, I wonder just what it was that Solomon understood about them. Could he really know their intentions? Did he understand their motivations? Commentaries on this biblical section disagree about whether this story should be taken literally as happening during the reign of Solomon or whether it is an adapted Indian folktale used to illustrate the wisdom of Solomon. Some even suggest that this story illustrates the danger of an all-powerful ruler or portends the splitting of the kingdom of Israel. While interesting, none of this ambiguity worries me. I’m more interested in the characters of the drama itself—the two women and the baby. One commentator remarks that the story “is substance, no doubt, for many a Mother’s Day service” (DeVries 61). I’m bothered by the typical readings of this story and worry what kind of Mother’s Day message is usually sent.

What makes someone a mother? I'm not sure I have an answer. The story of Solomon and the women seems to send a harsh message about the rights of motherhood. The usual reading seems to reinforce the idea that the world of women is divided into two camps—the mothers and the not-mothers. Commentaries generally label one of the women as the mother; the other is just “the other woman.”

Recently, I sat through a Sunday School class that studied this passage. I wanted to speak up, but I wasn't sure I could make myself understood. When the teacher asked us to explain how Solomon showed his wisdom, one woman responded, “Well, he knew that only one of them was the mother. That's why the other one didn't care if the baby died.” I heard the unspoken message: *Mothers love children. Other women don't.* The class chuckled over Solomon's cleverness; no one could pull the wool over his eyes. For the others in the Sunday School class Solomon is the star player in this drama. No one seemed concerned about either the baby or the mother of the dead child. Infertility has brought out my morbidity—the texture and sharp tang of bodily fluids. And so in Sunday school I imagined the unthinkable. What would have happened if Solomon had carried through with his threat? One clean slice through pink flesh and pools of blood on the floor of the throne room.

I thought about the other woman, the other mother. Her baby *was* born. For all we know he was strong and healthy and gave no sign of what was to come. I can imagine her with a baby of her own to hold while nuzzling his head and tasting his toes. She inhales him and then lays him in bed. Another woman from the household recently has had a baby, a boy as well. It was fun to compare stories—“Look how much hair they have. What a lusty cry. My boy's diaper is full again. He must be a good eater.” How long can you gaze at a sleeping baby? Pretty much forever, this mother thinks. Finally, she must go and attend to

chores of the household, and then exhausted she snuggles into bed next to him. He will wake her in the early morning with his cries of hunger. But he never wakes up. What did his mother think?

As I read the commentaries, I'm angry, frustrated by their underlying assumptions. The tone and the addition of "real" and "true" by all of the commentaries to label one of the women are disturbing. One scholar even claims that "the imposter revealed herself by her heartless cruelty. After all, no mother would have let her own child be killed just to spite another woman" (Cohen 2). Another adds that "the inescapable point of the whole story is its model of true motherhood" (DeVries 61). So what does this story teach me about "true motherhood?" Or about mistaken assumptions about "true motherhood" and the women who are deserving of becoming mothers?

In the biblical story, the two women are referred to as harlots. Biblical scholars debate whether the correct translation of the word "harlot" (in the King James Version) really means "prostitute" or "innkeeper." *Clarke's Commentary* claims that the negative connotation of the word is mistranslated and argues that if the women had been prostitutes they would not have been able to appear before King Solomon (396). However, other commentaries disagree and argue that the two women being prostitutes actually strengthens the message of the story. This distinction may seem petty, but it is used to further assert that if the women are prostitutes that 1) their word is suspect anyway or 2) even the basest of women can be held up as worthy citizens if they qualify as mothers. According to one commentary, "the common baseness of life of prostitution forms the background for contrasting displays of self-sacrificing love and heartless cruelty" (DeVries 61). I'm mad

that the scholars must make the story into an assessment of the humanity of these two women, but I'm also aware of the judgments I have made.

While volunteering at the women's shelter, I met a young pregnant woman with few resources. She went to several adoption agencies, trying to find the best deal. Several offered her job training, paid room and board for a year, payment of all medical expenses. Her response was "What about after the year?" As I sat in the reception area, answering the crisis line, I could hear her complaints to the shelter staff through the open door of the office. "Why doesn't anyone seem concerned about taking care of me?" she fumed. "All anyone cares about is this baby." While the staff tried to explain that a year's expenses would help her get back on her feet, I fantasized about her baby: what he looked like, what she might name him. When I returned the next week, I was told that she had opted for the abortion. When I saw her coming into the reception area, I went and hid in the bathroom and hoped that she would never get pregnant again. "She doesn't deserve to be a mother," I thought, "not like I do."

After feelings like this, I feel guilty for making judgments about any other women. It's this guilt that keeps me from moving ahead with adoption. Although I believe adoption is a healthy choice, I still feel as if I'm participating in another two women, one baby scenario. One of us will present the better case and go home with a baby.

When we began the adoption paperwork, I was excited. Kevin and I both agreed that our genes would not be a stumbling block to our loving a child. Then we were asked to fill in a "matching" sheet. The form asked, "Would we be willing to take a child that was ½ Pacific Islander, ¼?" "Could the baby have severe cystic fibrosis? Moderate? Mild? The birth mother? The birth father?" Every little box of nine different races and more than

twenty medical conditions required me to make a judgment about a child and biological parents that I have never met. A child to whom I would arrogantly assert that I could give a better life. Biological parents that I would claim to replace. Filling out the paperwork, I felt like a fraud, like a consumer trying to outbid someone, making the better deal. I'm ashamed to say that when I was told that sometimes the wait for a "matching child" is long, I replied, "Well, the advantage is that I know how to make myself look good on paper."

I keep thinking about the mother of the dead child and wondering what might have motivated her to suggest that another child be killed. Surprisingly enough, none of the commentaries suggests what to me seems the most obvious answer—irrational, uncontrolled grief. I wish I would have spoken up in the School class and tried to explain this woman. "Surely the Lord allows us our time to grieve," I might have said. Once on my way to work, I pulled over to the side of the road and screamed and moaned, banging on the steering wheel. I thought maybe with all the traffic going by no one would hear. It was the one time I could wail as loud as I'd been wanting to. At home I was too worried about disturbing the neighbors or my husband.

When I read that the actions of the mother who lost the child "typif[y] the meanness of which the human spirit is capable" (DeVries 58), I remember my own moments of meanness of spirit. No, I've never tried to hurt someone else's child, but I have dreamed about a close friend dying in a car accident. In my dream, I see blood smears on the freeway. Her grieving children come to me for consolation. I heroically offer to take them in, become their mother. It's a sick subconscious demonstration of my jealousy.

Once after asking me to babysit her unruly toddler, a frustrated young mother in my neighborhood told me, mostly in jest, that I could keep her child permanently. In the spirit of joke, I told her not to tempt me, that if I thought she meant it the child and I would be on the first plane to Argentina before she could change her mind. We both laughed, but I knew that I had carried the joke too far. If all my meanness over mothering were uncovered would someone have compassion when assessing my motivations or would my actions be chalked up to being unnatural or unmotherly?

After my third failed interuterine insemination I went to the store for comfort food: chocolate bars, cinnamon rolls that break apart. I walked the aisles looking for something to smother the feelings of emptiness and realized that I was clenching my hands. The grocery aisles of supermarkets in my town are literally overflowing with women extending the carts filled with small children away from them to protect bulging pregnant bellies. I never knew I could be filled with so much rage. I try to remind myself that their happiness isn't taking anything away from me, but it's hard not to resent them.

These same women are often the ones who tell me well-meaning miracle stories. "I know this girl, who tried for seven years, and when they finally stopped 'presto' they got pregnant; she just needed to relax." Although I never do, I want to tell them a story of my own. "I know this girl who tried for eleven years and then she adopted four babies, and then 'presto' nothing happened, even though she was relaxed and happy." In fact, I know a lot of stories like this, but nobody ever tells me those. Thinking that there is a reasonable explanation for the giving and taking of children is more comforting. "It must be God's



will,” I’m told. I wonder if that’s how Solomon would explain the death of the baby in the night.

When a close friend had a miscarriage recently, I felt almost vindicated. My first uncensored thought was “Finally, someone who can understand how I feel.” Then she surprised me by having a reaction different from mine. She was numb and told me she wasn’t sure that she even felt she’d lost a baby. She kept calling the fetus “it.” I couldn’t listen. First, I insisted that she was in denial and that the grief would eventually hit. When she admitted to feeling relieved and feeling guilty that she felt relieved, I felt hurt and angry. Although I never said anything, I avoided calling her because I couldn’t accept that she might not respond in the same way to an experience we shared. Would Solomon have understood that grief makes reality almost impossible to see, that often it shadows our ability to perceive the possibility of pain in others? Would I have seen another woman’s child as real?

I flushed the fifth fetus down the toilet. I couldn’t believe that lump of blood and tissue was my baby. My baby was beautiful and round with glowing skin. Maybe that sac with a shriveled raisin and a long tail wasn’t my baby at all. If it was, I couldn’t see it. I stood over the toilet in the middle of the night, shining a flashlight amongst all the blood straining to see, wondering if I should try to do something. Kevin lay sleeping in the next room. I thought about waking him, but I felt it was my decision to do alone. Finally, I decided my eyes had deceived me. The next morning I regretted the decision and tried to tell Kevin, but he couldn’t hear me talk about midnight blood right then. He had his own kind of silent grief.

Although the commentaries on the First Kings story mostly take the “true” mother’s testimony at face value, it is in one commentary’s questioning of her credibility that I find a

small measure of redemption for myself. *The New Interpreter's Bible* questions why Solomon doesn't bring up the question of credibility and proof of evidence, especially since the woman testifying of the baby switch admits to being sound asleep while the switch was being made. The commentary questions why "instead, he threatens the life of an innocent child, expecting the horrendous threat to provoke the responses he expects from his own stereotypes of the good mother and the deceptive woman" (44). I'm glad that the "true" mother's testimony is suspect, but I'm not ready to turn the tables and have her become the villain and the other become the "wronged woman." I'm tired of labels and categories. I'm tired of making judgments.

Perhaps Solomon was using cleverness to discover the cruelty in one of the women, but I'd like to think that there is more to the story than even Solomon understood. One commentator claims that the story is "not really about two harlots; it is about the harlot whose child was stolen from her" (DeVries 58). For me the story isn't about harlots or about stealing babies; it is a story about two mothers, one of whom had lost a child who would never be returned to her.

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## Learning to Create

“I’m finally home,” I yell. It’s 10:00 p.m. and I am tired after teaching my night class. The only lights come from downstairs—the pit. Too tired to flip on a light switch, I feel my way along the banister. In the den the clean, once-folded laundry has entropied into lopsided piles from the morning rush to find something to wear. Stacks of lesson plans and the cascade of ungraded papers ring the computer desk and the floor around it. I follow my ears and the unmistakable humming buzz of air being mixed with propane gas around the corner to Kevin’s lab. I can see my husband’s head—square and thick, covered by wild, tousled hair—and notice a stray lock on the nape of his neck that I missed during his most recent hair cut. His body blocks his hands and face from sight. I can’t see what he is doing; but I know the posture. As I approach I walk carefully, avoiding fragile tubes of uranium glass and neon sign transformers arranged in pyramids on the floor.

Already knowing he can’t respond, I say nothing. He’s controlling the flow of air into the molten glass tube with a rubber hose clamped gently between his lips. I put my hand on his shoulder. We have been married long enough to know the communication of touch. “I am here, when you are finished.” He nods. I watch him turning the glass, focused, seeing only the atoms that squirm and writhe to bend the glass. After a minute or two he sets down the glass, extinguishes the gas, and turns around, taking the rubber hose out of his mouth. Instinctively I smooth the untamed tufts of thick, brown hair, wondering if he brushed it this morning. I lick my thumb and wipe at the smudge of vacuum grease above his eyebrow. He runs his large hands down the sides of my torso from armpit to thigh, tracing the lines of my body. Then he grabs my belt loops and pulls me down onto his lap. I squirm. “My weight will break your legs.” He just laughs.

I go into the den to write before bedtime. Pushing student vocabulary logs off the keyboard, I find the mouse and then my most recent journal entry. I read a little to catch up on my own life. “. . . and the life is bleeding out of me. . .” I cringe that the literal sounds so trite. Rilke tells the young poet, “Ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: *must* I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer.” I don’t know that I must write; I just don’t know what other tools to use as I struggle with personal frustrations. Partly I’m limited by my lack of skill and experience, but sometimes it feels like language itself is inadequate for what I need.

“Kevin!” I yell into the lab. “What do you do when you’re stumped for ideas?” No reply. He’s turned on his vacuum pump and can’t hear me over the noise. I flip through my *American Heritage Dictionary* beside the computer. *Creative* is defined as “characterized by originality; imaginative.” Not enough information. I run upstairs for the massive 1960 *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* Kevin and I bought at a garage sale last year, complete with a rickety stand. The wisdom of its yellow curling pages is more intimate, more to the point. *Creative, adj., having the power to create; productive; inventive.* I backtrack to the preceding page. *Create, v., to originate; to bring into being from nothing; to cause to exist.* I start thinking about why and how I originated.

As a child I was surrounded by creative forces. I remember being seven and filled with the wonder that my dad was an artist. I was famous at school for one week out of the school year. My dad would come and visit all the classrooms, doing scribble drawings. “He’s just scribbling circles,” the kids would murmur. My dad smiled broadly. The current

third grade model would crane her neck to see the picture, a bit miffed that this man would make a joke out of drawing her. “Now watch,” my dad would announce. The kids would all lean forward, ready for the magic trick. I’d seen it all before, but I couldn’t help myself; I’d lean forward, too. Something from nothing. Like God, organizing matter. Suddenly, there she was on paper, the wild lines of black pen becoming her nose and the flip of her hairsprayed bangs.

Now, the house that I share with my husband is filled with artwork from my dad. “He’s amazing,” I tell politely listening visitors. “He’s done just about everything: woodcuts, paintings, prismacolor, pen and ink, sculpture.” Sometimes they ask if I am an artist. I always laugh and tell them the story of drawing the Barbie horse. I was playing with my younger sister, and she decided we should have an art show. I hadn’t been in an art class since sixth grade, but after all this was just for fun. I was seventeen; I could humor my seven-year-old sister. I rarely drew anything on my own; I was too afraid of a repeat of Mrs. James’ elementary art class. My clay cookie that was too lumpy, my pet rock with too many paint smears. The teacher never came right out and said they weren’t good, but I could see the disappointment in her eyes—I wasn’t an artist like my father. I could see the faults, too. I hadn’t been to hundreds of arts shows without gaining an experienced eye for the balance of clay required in a six-inch diameter peanut butter cookie replica. At nine I was already mingling at art exhibits with the blue-haired ladies who frequent important exhibits with their wild, dangling earrings. I recognized them as a necessary part of the landscape, their layers of chalky white face powder floating like snow flurries through the air and mingling with the smell of wine and sour-tasting cheese. As an adult, perhaps clay cookies are unimportant, but the impression that I didn’t measure up stayed with me.

So on that day of drawing Barbie's Palomino I decided to give my best effort, something I hadn't done on an art project for years. We finished our pictures. I handed mine to Andrea, and she proudly carried them off for the final jurored decision—Dad. He rubbed his eyes and looked at them both. Then holding up mine he said, "Andrea, you've done a wonderful job." I laughed tightly, resigned never to draw again and corrected him. "Dad, that one's mine; the other one is Andrea's picture." People laugh when I tell them the story, as if it is a finely woven piece of fiction. I swear it's a true, although I can't prove it. I threw away my picture.

I can still taste the disappointment of personally lacking something important—that "something" that separates the artists from the rest of us. What is it that makes someone a creator? My father, the artist, clearly falls into this category. Although his artwork hangs on the walls of my home, I wonder if perhaps my mother better fits my changing perception of creativity. My mother has had no formal art training, but I can still picture some of her "artwork" from my childhood. She drew pages of simple black lines with pencil on the backs of scratch paper. Every night my mother, a devout Mormon, read to us from the Book of Mormon until we were old enough to read it ourselves. On Sundays we got a special treat. She would draw storyboards of the chapter we were reading. Stick figures were all I ever saw my mother draw, but the antiquated language of scripture suddenly came alive with eyebrows pointed in or out, O's for mouths, and V legs crouched or bent in marathon motion.

When I close my eyes, I can see the last two proud warriors of an ancient American civilization—Shiz and Coriantumr. Bodies are strewn about—short, violent lines and rough

circles. Coriantumr smites off Shiz's head. Shiz rises up, a headless zigzag, and then falls forever. Every time I reread that story I see the violent lines from my mother's stubby pencil. My mother brought something powerful into existence. Not the scraps of storyboards that are long faded and smudged, but voices of triumph and pain inside the mind of a child. Her storyboards will never hang beside a Chagall; my mother's art is exclusively communal. Perhaps I shouldn't even call her stick figures art, but I'm learning that my mother knew something about creation. True creation is communication. The creator needs a purpose and often an audience or co-creators. Maybe women are in a position to understand more intimately that creating usually involves more than one person.

I think a lot about my own attempts at physical creation these days. I can't help but develop an intimate awareness of my own body. Doctors and thermometers, calendars and charts. Blood flows and mucous viscosity. Failure to create was never quite so concrete. I think I prefer the blank page of writer's block. For this quest of creativity, my need for another is obvious. I need Kevin to create a baby, another life, but for other things, too, my need for joint creative powers becomes apparent.

Lying on my back in the doctor's office splayed open with my feet in stirrups, I feel perpetually off balance. I'm a potato bug, with limbs flailing, consigned to a lifetime of helpless maneuverings to right myself. Dr. Andrew tries to be kind, but he seems to be more interested in showing his assistant the "fascinating necklace of pearl-like cysts" that ring my ovaries. "Just a few more minutes" he tells me, giving the trans-vaginal ultrasound probe an additional twist and pushing down hard on my left ovary. I wonder if when I stand up my



entire stomach and pelvic region will have shifted to the left, moving my bellybutton to somewhere above my hip. My Internet bulletin board buddies call these checkups “encounters with the magic wand.” After more than a year of these regular visits, I tend to agree with the term. “Magic wand,” indeed. Black magic, that is.

I feel helpless to fight back, so I barricade my vaginal walls from outside invasion, even friendly visitors. Kevin says he understands my reticence for intimacy. We joke sometimes that it would be nice if I only had a headache, rather than bruised and battered insides. I am glad that I tell him I want to wait a few days after too many encounters with the magic wand. I feel that I am selfish; I am more emotionally than physically sore, but I cling to the discovery that I can express my own private needs. Only in marriage have I begun to learn to do this.

Kevin takes me to the doctor when I begin bleeding at six weeks of pregnancy. This ob-gyn is not my doctor. He’s filling in for my nurse midwife who is at the hospital delivering babies. He orders blood and a urine pregnancy test. I try to ask questions, but he interrupts me. I remain polite anyway. “Your pregnancy test still says positive, but we have no way of knowing whether or not the gestational sac has been compromised.” I ask him bewildered, “What do I do now?” He sends me to the hospital for an ultrasound. I thank him for his time. He nods curtly. Kevin holds my hand and says nothing. I can feel unvoiced thoughts, words whirling like a tornado in his mouth, pushing against his lips. He tastes my pain on his tongue. As we’re getting into the car, he suddenly bursts, “What an idiot!” I don’t say anything, but my smile is not so tight.

After the doctor's appointment, I escape with an Anne Perry novel. Inspector Monk triumphs again, but it's not Monk who nags at me. It's a lesser character, Gabriel Sheldon, a soldier who has lost his right arm. It tingles with pain. I learned about the phenomenon of the ache of phantom limbs from my tenth grade psychology class, but this is the first time that a new idea occurs to me. Maybe the brain makes the limb ache as a survival mechanism. If it hurts it *must* be there. If I hurt I *must* exist. There is nothing quite so gritty and real as pain. I prefer avoidance, but the formless, shapeless me somehow aches for the deep, shooting unmistakable feel of a wound—the undeniable gushing of blood, pulsing of temples, and wild, unmanageable fear. I remember Kathleen Norris' suggestion that the act of describing is a type of defiance in the face of terror, giving the powerless a glimpse into another reality. I believe her. I need an affirmation of existence in a surreal world.

My mind wraps around the idea that pain is a way I create myself, but I'm not thinking academically when it stares me in the face. I'm a week and a half late this time. It's been long enough since the last miscarriage that I should be back to my regular schedule. I take a pregnancy test. Negative. I tell Kevin. He makes a face; I'm not sure what it means, but I'm too tired to ask. Numbers rule my life. Every morning I wake up and tell Kevin. "Day 10, no blood. Day 11, no blood." Day 12—I wake up with my stomach in knots. It could be stress; it could be morning sickness. But blood never lies. That night the pain in my abdomen and back is especially intense. "This has to be worth it," I mutter to myself. "What?" Kevin asks. He's adjusting his variac. It's hooked up to a tiny microwave fan that

blows just enough air to keep Kevin cool, yet not reach my side of the bed. Having a creative husband is helpful for marital compromise.

“No pain, no gain. You know the saying. It’s not true. Somehow that implies that if I’m in pain, I’m gaining something.” Kevin grunts, maybe a sign of deep thought, maybe he just doesn’t know what to say to me. “If I’m going to hurt, at least I’d like to be pregnant and hurt.” Another grunt. “I suppose I should be gaining some great personal or spiritual insight from all these trials, but I don’t feel like I’m growing, unless you count my expanding waistline and hips—wacked out from yo-yo hormones.” Another grunt. “I’m not growing, not growing at all,” this time more to myself. Kevin turns around; “You are growing. You are growing angry.” I can’t help but laugh. It’s good to know he is listening.

That night he sits on my lower back and rocks back and forth while we read scriptures together. Somehow the pain seems less intense if pressure is applied. I lie on my stomach and huff out the words. “When the Lord bares his holy arm do you think it’s a tender, gathering arm or an arm of war?” As he sits on me, Kevin increases the rocking to a vigorous bounce. “You’re not having trouble breathing are you?” We go to bed that night like spoons, our bodies contoured to one another. I’m still unsure about the future. I’m afraid that my body will never create a healthy baby, but I’m comforted by Kevin’s presence. As I drift off to sleep, I realize that we are trying to create more than a baby. Something new has originated from our two, originally separate, lives. For the first time in weeks I have lucid dreams.

## I Didn't Grow Up in a Desert

Even after more than seven years of living in one, I still have moments when I'm caught off guard and I feel I have been windblown, like Dorothy, to a foreign land. Once at a welfare dairy to paint fences, I just stood and sniffed the air. The cow dung smelled like dust, a gritty, dead smell that I had never before associated with cows. In my mind, dairy farms should smell alive and fermenting, a strangely intoxicating mixture of rotting earth and of cream just beginning to turn. As a child, I never really felt that my body was tied to geography. Both my parents grew up in the West, and in our small southeastern Missouri town we were often viewed as outsiders. We didn't know anything about farming; we weren't related to anyone in those parts; and even we children who grew up there never really picked up the softened accents of our neighbors. It didn't bother me to move away after high school. I didn't think I left anything behind. But now there are moments when I realize that my body feels displaced. Sometimes after swimming, my skin tingles with the memory of summer dampness, nights lying in front of a fan that pushed the beads of sweat along my backbone but never dried them. I lie for hours in the bathtub, with the door closed, inhaling steam.

When my husband showers, he opens the bathroom door and tries to expel any humidity in the bathroom with a flapping towel. His showers are short and efficient, never letting the water run for long or at a very high pressure. He grew up in the desert of the High Sierras and learned that water was a scarce commodity, something to be used quickly and efficiently, but never wasted. When he brushes his teeth, the faucet is turned on for two short blasts, once to wet and once to rinse. His prayers, like those of other Westerners I hear in

church, thank God for moisture, not the specifics of rain or snow, but anything wet that might fall from the sky.

I'm drawn to this reverence for water. I'm learning to be a two short blasts tooth brusher. But there is something that is inherent in my husband that I still cannot understand, something that seems connected to the desert. I expect rain from every thundercloud. He's never surprised when they blow over without dropping anything. Perhaps I'm oversimplifying the effects of childhood geography, but as we struggle to have a child, I can see Kevin seems somehow better prepared to deal with the disappointment of physical and emotional drought.

As Kevin and I make our traditional drive from Springville, Utah to Bishop, California for Christmas, I'm reminded that I still feel out of place in the desert. Because there are very few towns and road signs to mark the way, I must use the clock or the odometer to gauge how far we've come. "Where are we?" I often ask him if I happen to doze off and then wake up disoriented. No matter where we are along the drive, Kevin can usually place himself by the variations in landscape or the frequency of power poles. To me it all looks the same—sagebrush and dust. I look forward to the drive because it means time with my husband, but I barely glance at the passing landscape.

The six-hour Christmas trip from Springville, Utah to Bishop, California has been carefully planned for weeks now. These car trips are tradition in our marriage, a time set aside with no outside interruptions. I save up my angst for the long drive and catalogue each topic and sub-topic in their proper chronological folders. I am the official "important emotional topics in our marriage" discussion planner, and Kevin knows to be prepared. I bring along Twizzlers and Peanut M&M's to soften the intensity of the barrage.

As long as we are still on I-15 the conversation remains fairly light. We talk about our jobs. Kevin is relieved to have a week free from blindly hunting bugs in computer code written by programmers who are no longer with the company. I am overjoyed to have all my grades turned in and to know that I will never again have to deal with Jeong Hwa's psycho insistence that I am teaching the TOEFL grammar class all wrong. Kevin asks for ideas of what to do with his Varsity Scouts and complains about the myriad frustrations that come with being a Scoutmaster. I know this pattern, the familiar daily talk of goings and comings that binds us together.

As we pull onto Highway 6 at Delta, the tenor of the conversation changes. I want reassurances. Will I ever get pregnant? Is Kevin still ok with paying all this money? Is he willing to do more semen analyses? Would he be willing to adopt if all this doesn't work? Does he mind the big scar along my bikini line from the laparotomy? The weight gain from the drugs? What if the increased hormones result in twins? Is he still ok with additional inseminations? Does he mind giving me shots? Is he still open to considering in-vitro in the future? Is he sure? Is he sure he's sure? Kevin's assurances fuel my guilt and do not assuage my growing insecurity. I must place blame, assign a proper cause to this downward-spiraling tornado of confusion.

"I love you. I trust you. We are in this together." He doesn't say that today—not so explicitly—with his hands clenched on the steering wheel, but I can see it in the arch of his eyebrows, the incessant gnawing at the inside of his lip. Yet, his devotion is not enough. There is still the ever-present question looming--the one I have never had the courage to ask before. My mouth goes dry, but today is the day for questions. If I am to win this battle against my body, the universe, and God, I must slice through the uncertainty to seize an

answer to every question, leave no doubt unresolved. We still have several hours left of the trip. I will wait for my hands to stop shaking, and I fall silent to the teeming of my own thoughts.

A married woman understands that her husband has different desires, perceptions, and responses to daily life. I chatter incessantly in the mornings; he barely grunts. I want to invite as many people over as possible to a party; he'd rather stay home and watch a video with me or disappear down in the basement to make adjustments to his homemade meeker burner. But the intensity of the quest for parenthood is not something to be shrugged off as a difference of opinions. When control over creation of your own family is denied, you pick up the battle axe and with your spouse prepare to fight back. You spend hours dreaming of the first cry from a squished but miraculous creature covered in milky slime, rant to your spouse about the unfairness of the world in general, develop calluses on your knees from hours spent hand-in-hand supplicating God, take turns stomping on the geranium given to you at church on Mother's Day, eat fresh pineapple and drink coconut milk on possible implantation days, and ransack the library shelves for fertility books until the librarian knows your cycle days almost better than you do. But, you do not, do not, commit the unpardonable sin of being hesitant, for fear of appearing less than committed to the cause. A powerful and united front is what is required. Divided, under-excited we fall.

I know Kevin wants children, too. Haven't we talked about it? Haven't we carefully planned? In my own mind I have woven images of me reading stories and poems aloud every night at bedtime to a row of cherubic faces, nestled in their beds. I have seen Kevin patiently helping to finish one more winning science fair project. He knew this. He always listened and nodded as I unveiled our newest happily ever after, but he was always too silent.

I wanted him to be overflowing with words of the land of milk and honey we would populate when my body started cooperating and all our dreams came true. Oh, he listened, with the appropriate head nods and hand squeezes, but I wasn't getting what I wanted. I could never see his desire bubbling out of him, spilling over the edges of his mind, coloring his entire mental landscape. With all of the emotion I had invested in having a baby only to end in failure, I couldn't understand how he could still love to go downstairs, crank up his vacuum pump and try to pull a harder vacuum for his plasma discharge tubes. His face would shine when he talked about whether or not his new recipe for firebricks could withstand the heat of the latest kiln he was building. But when we talked about children it was matter of fact, scientific, a to-do list posted on the fridge.

At church Kevin would want to get up and move if a family with small children sat in the pew behind us. "Too much noise. I can't take the shrill screaming," he explained. Once after coming home from visiting friends with rambunctious children he said, "Some people would say those kids just need a good beating." I started to cry, and he never said it again. I wondered if he considered himself "some people" and feared that he continued to have thoughts that he kept to himself.

Sometimes at night I dream of whole rows of pregnant women lying on their backs on the freeway, their swollen bellies forming an endless ocean of rolling hills. I dare not even admit to myself the hazy picture of advancing military tanks in the far distance, shining in the sun and approaching with horrifying rapidity. When I wake up, my stomach roils and churns. I am overtaken by a wave of nausea and feel thick with shame. Are we responsible for the content of our own dreams? Am I victim or perpetrator?—these lines blur as I wake from the nightmare to the stink of sweat and salt of tears. I give Kevin a milder version of



the dream and tell him that sometimes I imagine shoving pregnant women down onto their knees, secretly envisioning scraped shins and bruised elbows. I avoid Wal-Mart and Macey's on days like this. The endless barrage of big bellies in the cereal and produce aisles makes my arm muscles tense and my fingers tingle. Kevin doesn't seem horrified that there is a demon in possession of his wife. He chuckles, as if relieved that he is not the only one who cannot let go of emotional fiends. He doesn't say it, but I imagine him telling me that I might need them in the fight ahead.

A year before, we had three foster children come to live with us. Although I'd thought about it a lot, I'd always been afraid to ask him if we could try being foster parents. To my surprise when I finally asked if we could try being foster parents, Kevin seemed to think it was a good idea, especially when I promised to do the bulk of the work. We asked for one school-aged child. We received three brothers, ages four, three, and one and a half. The first month all three would wake up multiple times in the night crying. Kevin would mutter, and I would get out of bed to go find out what was wrong. When Kevin saw the dark circles that were forming under my eyes, he started getting up, too.

Once, after leaving Kevin for several hours alone with the boys, I came home afraid of finding the boys crying and Kevin in a bad mood. Instead, I found all four dancing around the kitchen making farting noises and singing Spike Jones' songs. Soon, Kevin was bringing home refrigerator boxes for Big Wheel garages and floppy disk labels to be used as stickers. Sometimes though, I'd hear him muttering angrily under his breath because the kids had broken something or because he never had time to do anything he wanted to do anymore. When another family adopted the children after five months in our home, I wanted to reminisce with Kevin.

“How do you feel having the kids gone?” I asked, hoping for reassurance that the experience had left him longing for a whole brood of children.

He misread my intentions. “It’s great! I love having all this time to spend with you now.”

A road sign jolts me back to the present. *Tonopah 53 miles* —not much time left. I muster the courage and break the silence of the endless, barren Nevada landscape, so different from the lush saturation of green Missouri hills that I knew as a child. It is time for me to ask what I really want to know. I try to sound casual, offhand: “Kevin, do you really want children?”

“I think having kids is a good thing to do.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Yes, I did. I said I think we should have kids.”

“I’m not talking about obeying a commandment. I’m talking about your own desires. Do you want children?”

His face, so easy for me to read, twists with emotion—frustration mostly, some veiled anger. “I already told you that. Why do you think I’m paying thousands of dollars for treatments? Have you heard me complain? Do you think I like giving sperm samples, like I’m a scientific experiment? Why do you think I’m doing all this? I don’t understand what you want from me.”

My heart constricts, forcing an upward pulse of heat to wreath my face with shame. I know I should stop, but I cannot. Very quietly, with trembling voice, I ask again. “But do you really want kids? Or do you just love me so much you want me to have what I want?”

I have trapped him. He will not lie. He will not willfully hurt me. “Aren’t my actions proof enough? I’ve said yes to that question four times now. What else do I have to do to convince you?”

It is not the answer I want, but I have no more to say aloud. What about desires? What about deep longings that keep you awake at night? I know this man. He is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. I have measured the depth and breadth of his immense heart, and have not found it lacking, but I also know that he is not currently capable of being as excited about children as he is about finding a cheap source of type R thermocouple wire.

I am betrayed; I am the betrayer. Marital treason has been committed, but I’m not sure who is the most culpable. How can a man not long for his own children? How can a woman cut her own husband to the bone for loving her more than his own desires?

When our friends David and Wendy had their second baby, he was reluctant to hold it. He has never been first in line to interact with people; machines have always held more interest for him. But I always thought that when the time came to try to have our own children that the search for answers would consume him, like it did me. Logically, I wasn’t being fair. I knew he would do everything I asked, if I said it was important: changing diapers, getting up in the middle of the night. That’s the kind of man that he is. But would he *want* to do those things? Once Kevin told me that when he sees a newborn baby he gets sick to his stomach. “They look alien,” he said. Of course, I cried and Kevin wished he had never said anything. I felt guilty and wished that I hadn’t cried.

“Commitment is more important than desires,” I mouth while Kevin is outside the car pumping gas in Tonopah, but my heart is breaking. He feels this wrenching pain, too. I can

see the anguish on his face as he yanks hard on the seatbelt and peels out, leaving the ghost town behind.

We have mutely declared armistice and are sharing offerings of soggy tuna sandwiches and red-gold Jonathan apples. Kevin has his hand on my knee and is kneading the outside muscles of my thigh with his thumb. Relaxing into familiarity, I take a short nap. I awake with a bump in Kevin's parents' driveway. My stomach lurches with fear; I had almost forgotten the babies.

Christmas at the Christiansens would be a little different this year. We always make gingerbread houses and go skiing on New Year's Eve. Kevin receives a list of things to fix around the house from his Mom. Glenn does tune-ups on all of the out-of-town cars, and Reed flies RC planes. But this year there would be babies. The first two Christiansen grandchildren had been born this past fall. For a seven-kid, homemade-bread kind of Mormon clan, all the Christiansens are a little slow to get married. My in-laws were beginning to despair with their oldest child at 33 and their youngest at 22 and no marriages in sight, but suddenly there were three married off in the space of two years—Kevin, Jana, and David. We all waited 6 months to a year, and then the unspoken quest for children began. My in-laws are by and large a “don't ask don't tell” kind of family. But you pay attention to the jokes, the nods, and insinuations, and you know that the good-natured competition to produce one of the first grandchildren has begun. So there I was, two years later, greeting two of my sisters-in-law with the two winning babies in their arms—Stuart and Alex.

When the pregnancies were announced I was excited; I thought that we too would soon have an announcement of our own. But now that I had a year of fruitless exhaustion behind me, I felt that I was in the middle of the biggest failure of my life, the inability to

fulfill the measure of my creation. Multiply and replenish was out of the question, I was still struggling for emotional survival. A very, merry Christmas. “For unto you is born this day, a child...” to every married woman present, that is, except for me.

By dinner, I had shoved my self-pity and shame back to their hidden closets. Mealtime at my in-laws is always interesting. The entire family sits around a solid wooden table, modeled after the sturdy tables in prison cafeterias. Long benches, attached to the sides with heavy steel pipes, are cleverly designed to be pulled out for eating and pushed back in for storage. Each side bench comfortably seats five adults. My father-in-law usually sits at one end on his rolling dentist chair, and my mother-in-law sits at the other end on a straight-backed dining chair. This year, the new babies sit in separate swings to the side, clumsily rolling helpless bright triangles around in the plastic swing trays, forgotten for the moment in an overwhelming swell of adult conversation—President Clinton’s newest scandal, my father-in-law’s upcoming retirement, David’s medical school horror stories, Sara’s semester with an uncontrollable first grade class. I breathe a sigh of relief. I can do this. I can behave like a normal person, talk about adult things.

Suddenly three-month-old Stuart realizes that if he bangs upon the leg of his swing with his rattle, he can make a louder noise than the banging of the tray. Excited by the noise, three-month-old Alex also begins battering his toy. They are funny miniature men, with their oversized heads still wobbling upon uncertain shoulders. Balding, like grampas, they hoot out in unison, giving us all gummy smiles. The entire family is now focused on them, smiling and laughing and commenting on the wonders of infants. Even in my grief and jealousy, how can I help but smile back? I cannot ignore the innocent joy of a child, but Kevin stiffens beside me. I look up, expecting to see strain or even slightly concealed

annoyance in response to the shrill hooting. Instead, his thick eyebrows are drawn down, outlining the anger in his eyes. With a glare that slices my heart in two, he concentrates his fury upon the babies and then upon the mothers.

Mashed potatoes stick and swell in my throat. Time stands still. For a split-second, I cannot breathe, but no one notices. I hold perfectly still and do not move. I feel transfixed in time, a prisoner in a watery bubble of grief, but I force myself to resume eating. Bite down, chew, swallow. Bite down, chew, swallow. The hazy lines of the table, the dishes, my own hands wielding a knife and fork slow their vibrations and begin to return to focus.

“Anyone for dessert?” I am relieved that dinner is over. Touching Kevin’s leg, I tell him that I will be in the bathroom. I cannot look at his face, the one that I am tied to forever, the one that despises babies. Would God make us wait for Kevin to be ready for parenthood?

Later that night we lie side by side in two twin beds, pushed together at Kevin’s insistence. Although he doesn’t want the warmth of my body to overheat the sheets on his side, he doesn’t want to sleep apart either. Separate beds, even at his parents’ house, break his rules of marital commitment. He slept in one of these beds as a child. Now his great man-feet hang over the edge, but he is no longer the boy who lay in this bed alone night after night. What did he think about then? Did he ever imagine a wife? I think he must have envisioned some metal-clad amazon, with breasts too ponderous to run through the jungle—a familiar figure wielding swords on the covers of the stacks of sci-fi/fantasy novels he brought into our marriage. Did he ever imagine children? Not likely. Maybe he dreamed of a world without parents, where no one was required to pull weeds or wash windows. Lying in that bed his head would have been filled with ideas for the computer game he was writing, snippets of Morse code, or ingenious ways to wreak his revenge upon cruel taunters at

school. But his dreams were not my dreams. I was the child miles away in Missouri, envisioning daughters in pink frocks eating bread and jam and calling me “Mommy.”

“Naomi?” It is not a boy’s voice anymore that interrupts my thoughts, but a deep gravelly one, filled with a child’s vulnerable fear just the same. “Naomi, are you mad?” He senses my stillness and knows what it means.

Wearily now. “No, not mad. Hurt maybe. Confused maybe. Not mad.” I shut my eyes to stop the tears, but my lids offer flimsy resistance against the flood.

“What did I do?” He’s afraid of the answer, but his courage does not flag.

Choking on sorrow, I will be honest. “The babies. . . it’s hard enough. . . but. . . you glared at them. I don’t understand the way you feel. How can you hate a baby?”

“I don’t hate babies. We just spent six hours in the car talking about them.” He clenches his pillow.

“Then why did you look so mad?” I am aware of his arm a few inches from my fingers, but I am afraid to reach out and touch it.

“I glared because the babies were the center of attention, and I was annoyed that this baby festival was happening right in front of you. It is bad form to have a banquet in front of a starving man. The last thing you need with all of this infertility stuff is for everybody to ooh and aah over the babies. I didn’t want to be a part of it.”

Suddenly, I see him a little more clearly, the protector who always tells me to wear my shoes outside. “You’re going to step on cocklebur,” he constantly warns. I don’t usually listen. Most of my childhood was spent barefoot, running through grass, wading through creeks. We didn’t have cockleburs. I used to laugh at Kevin’s admonitions. “My

feet are tougher than you think. Your feet are just soft,” I told him. Now I can see perhaps he knew the truth about preparations and expectations all along; he learned it from the desert.



## The Converging of Light

To make a Spinach Slushie: Pour two cups of pineapple juice into your Vita-Mix blender. Add three large handfuls of fresh spinach. Throw in 1-2 frozen bananas. Blend and enjoy. To be honest, they're really starting to grow on me. I have one at least once a week now, when I'm feeling low on greens or when I need the pineapple during the luteal phase. I've tried just about everything, and I'm hoping that the spinach will give me the energy to keep trying for a baby.

"Disgusting!" my husband said when he tasted the slushie. "Do you really think that helps?" After five years of marriage I'm accustomed to Kevin's directness. (Kevin says that's just a nice way of saying lack of tact.) Whatever you call it, Kevin and I have different approaches to life. At night, he dreams of giant gears turning in sync; in all my dreams I'm in Wal-Mart, bumping into people I used to know. When we first met, Kevin was kneeling on his living room floor, a tangle of wires extending from couch to armchair, explaining the properties of the secondary windings on his Tesla coil. I couldn't stop looking at his hands, large and square, but dexterous enough to solder small and delicate connections.

I'm still charmed by Kevin's insatiable curiosity for anything that runs and beeps, rather than walks and talks. On Saturday mornings while I lounge reading a novel, he scours the local scrap yard, taking apart old machines and medical instrumentation, looking for finds for his junk "box" (which now occupies most of our garage, Kevin's lab, half the downstairs den, and usually a large part of our driveway). I don't mind the physical clutter, but my fluctuating hormones and his lack of interest in the non-mechanical are often at odds. I want to have a baby; he's still ambivalent about his own desires for fatherhood. Over the last five years he's proven that he'll go the distance to help me to have what I want, but for me that

hasn't always been enough. While he works downstairs on his latest project, I often lie in bed and cry.

Trying to have a baby has exhausted me. When we were first married, I used to ask Kevin to explain his various projects. Although I often didn't understand the technical details, I enjoyed watching his face light up and began to learn a basic vocabulary for communicating about thyratrons and thermistors. After a while, I only had enough energy for my own concerns. When I realized that part of the reason I felt so alone on the fertility journey was my own self-retreat, I asked Kevin to start sharing his projects and lab notes with me again. Creating a baby is not the only productive act of marriage. When writing this essay, I wanted Kevin's voice to be heard. He gladly wrote down his version of this story.

*Lab Notes for Laser Therapy: The exact wavelength of HeNe lasers isn't the critical feature, since HeNe lasers and laser pointers emit different wavelengths (colors of light). Also, a single wavelength (monochromatic light) isn't the critical feature, because laser pointers (and most diode lasers in general) emit a relatively wide continuum of wavelengths, rather than just one wavelength.*

When we realized that we couldn't get pregnant on our own, we went to a fertility specialist. "You're hostile," the doctor told me. Kevin thought that was pretty funny. His wife had been voted "happiest person" by her high school graduating class and "sunniest personality" at summer camp three years in a row. "She's anything but hostile," he was quick to tell the doctor. The doctor explained that he meant my cervical mucous. "We can

bypass all that hostility by doing artificial insemination.” Kevin knows me well; I was still upbeat and hopeful. So, we tried insemination. Three times.

At first we were embarrassed by all the instructions. Try to predict how long it will take you to “collect a sample” at home. Don’t spill any; don’t get anything else in the collection cup. Is there enough volume? Don’t use any lubricants, except egg whites. *Egg whites?* Drive to our office immediately. Make sure to keep the sample warm, under your arm or between your legs the whole way.

We made it. Our predictions weren’t quite accurate (we were 10 minutes late) and the egg whites were given an emphatic “no” vote (too sticky), but we made it. Apparently, the sperm and egg didn’t get the message. So, we went back and tried again. And again. Each time I took more hormones, hoping to convince my ovaries to produce an egg that would accept the advancing sperm. Kevin did his part, but it had all become clinical—producing samples for the cup, giving me hormone shots, acquiescing to the “not today, maybe tomorrow” schedule of intercourse. He retreated downstairs to his lab more often.

*Furthermore, coherent light (beams which are mode-locked and parallel) aren't the critical factor because laser pointers are neither, and besides, as soon as the light hits the skin, it is immediately scattered, so only the top-most cells "see" coherent light anyway, assuming that you are using a coherent laser (laser pointers are not coherent, yet they work).*

“How much money do we have to spend before this doctor figures out that what he’s doing isn’t working?” he wanted to know. I just wanted to skip work, sleep, and wear my pajamas all day. Sometimes I did. When I went out and bought fifteen home pregnancy

tests, the bill totaling \$237.62, he became frustrated. “Do you really need that many? Why can’t you wait until your doctor’s appointment each month?” I tried to explain that they were on sale. I thought it was worth the peace of mind. From then on I hid the tests that I took early in the bottom of the trashcan. When I bought more tests, I threw away the receipts.

After several painful procedures and a failed surgery, I began searching for anything that might work. I visited an iridologist, a woman who read my irises like a map of my body. Following her instructions, I drank gallons of water with sticky monkey flower essence, gagged on herbal supplements, and had my entire colon cleaned out in a weeklong fresh fruit and vegetable juice fast. I had the seven shakras of my body read and tried Tahitian Noni juice. During ovulation week I wore a pair of earrings, a gift from my sister, with a miniature sperm on one lobe and an egg on the other. I prayed and read scriptures that used to comfort me. I rubbed African fertility goddesses until my hands turned brown from the wood stain. “What’s that on your hands?” Kevin wanted to know.

*So, after we eliminate all of the above, the only thing that is left is that we need a bright (20-40 milliwatts), small (1-2mm diameter) spot of light in the red end of the spectrum. This can easily be generated by a flashlight bulb, a red filter, and a positive lens.*

On the Internet, I found out that having sex on red sheets increases your chances of getting pregnant. Wild yams should be eaten during the first two weeks of your cycle. Pineapple the second two weeks. Placing a pillow underneath your rear right after sex helps avoid losing swimmers. Most women seem to agree that standing on your head is no longer the preferred way of helping gravity, but I know women with Ph.D.’s who have tried this.

There is a particular brownie recipe that circulates on boards and in chat rooms. You have to make them with your husband and both must eat them right before you BD with your DH (Baby Dance with your Dear Husband). For the religious, you can buy saint medallions and sign up for prayer lists. Positive thinking is also big—during the moment you must think “swim, baby, swim.” More kelp is good. Too much soybean bad. I once read four different nutritional fertility books, each with a different plan. When I combined all the information, I realized that the only food left for me to eat (that would simultaneously help my polycystic ovaries, raise my thyroid, lower my estrogen, and prepare my uterus) was organic spinach, which is why I became such a big fan of the slushie recipe.

At night Kevin would hold me while I cried, awkwardly trying to wipe my nose and eyes. If he didn't have a Kleenex, he'd just use his T-shirt tail. “Why worry about something you can't change?” he asked. I wondered if he even wanted to have a baby. I think he wondered if his wife would ever be happy again.

*The above facts, when combined with a little thought about what coherent laser light does when it hits a translucent non-homogeneous medium, suggest that a (extremely expensive) medium-power HeNe laser is not required. Both HeNe lasers and high-power laser pointers have successfully been used.*

Then we received the email from my mother-in-law about laser therapy. Kevin never said anything to his mother about our problems. His family is very private, and Kevin especially so. I never spoke of the late nights of disappointment and crying, but I kept her up-to-date on the different medical procedures we had tried. Occasionally she'd send me

clippings of new alternative fertility therapies. Apparently, she had been researching and discovered information about a fertility specialist with years of experience. The good news—he only lived about thirty minutes from our house. The bad news—most of his experience was on cows in China.

Kevin was tired of paying for doctors that didn't work. He was tired of being married to a woman who was no longer his happy-go-lucky wife. I was tired of lying on a table with my legs in stirrups for hours on end, having foreign objects shoved inside me: laminaria roots, surgical instruments, pressurized dye, ultrasound probes, and other people's gloved fingers. We were tired of each other's tiredness. We decided to go see Darrell Stoddard, the cow specialist.

*According to Dr Stoddard, in China the farmer treated the infertility by shining the laser on the cow's clitoris for about 10 minutes each day during the first 10 days (?) of the cow's menstrual cycle. For some reason that's not understood, this treatment makes more than 90% of the formerly infertile cows able to get pregnant.*

My mother-in-law's information was out of date and Darrell had retired, but he agreed to meet us in his home. Tall, with tousled gray hair, he looked more like a professor than a medical professional. He had just returned from China and had just published a book, which he offered to loan us. Did either of us read Chinese? Well, it didn't matter anyway, he could tell us what we wanted to know. But he had to warn us that what he was doing was considered experimental and not sanctioned by the clinic. Because of this he couldn't officially treat us. However, he'd be happy to share any free information that we wanted.

When he and Kevin launched into a scientific discussion of the various properties of laser light, I tuned them out and thumbed through the photo album on the coffee table.

All the way home, Kevin explained the specifics. “Farmers treat the infertility in cows by shining a HeNe laser on the cow’s clitoris.

“HeNe laser?” I interrupted.

“Helium Neon.” Kevin was impatient to continue his explanation, without stopping to define what he perceived to be obvious.

*According to Dr Stoddard some medical doctors (including him) have started applying this treatment to infertile human females, in order to see if it will have the same success. Enough doctors are experimenting with this treatment that medical companies now sell medium-power HeNe lasers for this purpose.*

I’d done a lot of research on cutting edge fertility treatments but had never heard of laser therapy. I was dubious but didn’t want to dampen Kevin’s enthusiasm.

“Naomi, he has some people that have gotten pregnant using his laser. This could really work for us.”

“But didn’t he say that his laser was broken on the plane trip home from China?” I had paid attention to that part, especially after Darrell explained that a replacement laser could cost up to twenty thousand dollars.

“I might have an idea. That’s what Darrell and I were talking about. It’s really pretty easy when you think about what coherent laser light does when it hits a translucent non-homogenous medium.”

That's when I tuned the rest of the explanation out. I leaned back in the seat, watching the car lights in the oncoming lane zoom past. I didn't want to shine any kind of laser light down there. *Who knew cows even had a clitoris?* I wasn't sure I wanted to try to get pregnant anymore. The irony was that as soon as I had given up, Kevin was suddenly showing interest.

After work the next evening he disappeared downstairs to his lab and didn't come upstairs until after midnight. He was waving a small board on which was mounted a toilet paper tube full of wires.

"I did it and for dirt cheap. I found everything I needed downstairs." He set the laser simulator down on the bed and began explaining each part. I still didn't understand most of what he was saying, but I was watching his hands move the way I had the first time we met in his apartment as he explained his Tesla coil.

"It's beautiful. A real work of art," I said kissing him. I knew I had to use the laser now, even if it didn't work. How could I not be willing to try this? For past treatments, Kevin had tried to be supportive, but because it was my plumbing that was haywire, I had taken the initiative and made the decisions. Talking about it too much wore him out. Suddenly, Kevin wanted to lie awake talking about fertility issues (i.e. the technicalities of HeNe lasers), and his excitement was infectious.

*I assembled a simple laser simulator, entirely from parts that I had in my junk box. A small flashlight bulb from a penlight (chosen because it has an integrated condenser lens) was mounted in a cut-down toilet paper tube and hooked to a wall transformer via a current-limiting resistor, so I wouldn't have to use batteries. In front of the bulb, I placed a red filter,*



*and in front of that, I placed a small magnifying glass lens. After aligning the optics and gluing them into the cut-down toilet paper tube, I wrapped the tube with masking tape, producing a hand-held "laser" about 5 inches long and about an inch in diameter.*

The next cycle on day four, we began the regimen. Ten minutes each night for ten days. Ten minutes is a surprisingly long time to lie with your legs open, while your husband focuses a red light on your most vulnerable parts. At first it felt strangely obscene, but we stuck with it. Soon the obscene became comfortable to the point of being absurd.

Eventually, we started doing our nightly New Testament reading during the laser sessions. I lay on my back, the open scriptures on my belly. While I read from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Kevin adjusted the jury-rigged laser so that the point of light stayed focused. "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts." This combining of the sacred and the carnal was strangely comforting. Within two months I was pregnant.

*The use of this simulated laser is gratifying both because it makes it possible for Naomi to get pregnant, and because it is neat to be able to substitute five dollars worth of optics rolled up in a toilet paper tube for a 10-20 thousand dollar medical laser.*

I was excited; the doctor was excited; Kevin was ecstatic. He helped me remember to take my multivitamins, carried all the groceries to keep me from lifting, and cautioned me against doing too much housework. At week eight we saw the heartbeat, a small blinking

light of hope. When the doctor left the room, Kevin tried using the ultrasound against his arm. “I see ultrasound machines on Ebay all the time – I wonder if I can find any at the scrap yard,” he told me. When I began hemorrhaging at week twelve he wiped down my legs, helped me change my underwear, and drove me to the hospital. He didn’t cry, but cursed at the doctor when we lost the pregnancy.

Because the doctor wanted to check the fetal material, a dilation and curettage was ordered. I agreed to anesthesia, an amnesiac, because the doctor suggested it would be easier for me to deal with the emotional and physical pain of the procedure. I don’t remember much from that medicated haze of having my insides vacuumed out, only Kevin asking the doctor how hard of a vacuum the machine pulled. I remember thinking the doctor didn’t like all those questions and wondered why he kept lowering his voice and looking at me when he answered. Kevin failed to notice the doctor’s reticence and boomed out, “Do you actually use 700 torr?”

I was mostly paranoid of saying something ridiculous while medicated. When I asked Kevin later if I had said anything embarrassing while under the influence, he told me that all I asked was whether I had said anything dumb yet and if he could see anything that looked like a baby moving through the tubes or stuck in the hopper. “I didn’t say anything else?” I worried.

“No, you were fine. You just repeated those two questions about twenty times.”

On the way home I was coherent but still fuzzy headed. I wanted to sleep and cry but didn’t think my body would let me do either. Although normally glad to talk, I wanted to

hold myself as still as possible, to internally search out the empty and numb places in my body. Kevin, usually reticent, expresses his nerves by becoming chatty. He was still talking about the machine. He wanted me to understand the oddity of the force of power generated by a machine that only aspirates. I didn't want to think about that machine, but I didn't have the strength to explain myself. "But the noise it made was out of a horror movie," he said. "I'm glad you were out of it."

At home I lay in bed, trying to regain my strength. Eventually, I would have to make a decision about whether to try again, whether to fill out those adoption papers sitting on the counter, or whether to make other kinds of plans for my life. But for awhile I just needed to be still and not think about moving on. "I think I'll just lie here by myself for awhile," I told Kevin. He agreed and willingly retreated downstairs to his lab. A few hours later, I woke and saw him standing in the doorway. "What are you working on downstairs?" I asked.

"I'm making fiber optic stars to hang above our bed," he smiled. "I bet kids would really like something like that."