

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

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The Natural

"To share a memory is to put a body into words." – Sara Ahmed

In kindergarten, I draw a series of stick figures with a big square building in the background on tan construction paper. The stick figures are each a different color, the roof of the building red. I—the slightly taller stick figure in the center—am in charge. We're supposed to be drawing a picture of what we'll answer as grown-ups when quizzed with "What do you do?" When my teacher asks what I have drawn, I tell her I want to run an orphanage. "That's me, in the middle," I say, helpfully when she doesn't understand. "Oh, I see," she says, smiling. "You mean you want to be a mommy?" Her dress, effervescent rayon tacked together with wide wooden buttons, clings to her bony hip as she smiles over me. "No," I insist, "I want to run an orphanage." Her eyes flit to the other kids at my table (children who drew more acceptable illustrations no doubt) almost as if she worries what they will think of my drawing. Her smile plastics as she moves towards them, leaving me with my discouraged stick figures.

For more than 25 years, I've been told I'm a natural with babies. I know how to do the bounce and rock when they cry and can fend off flying pee and projectile poop while changing a diaper. My naturalness is so apparent an acquaintance once remarked so on a Facebook photo of me simply sitting and holding a friend's two-month-old. No advanced jostling skills displayed. I'm the friend who holds your days-old infants without batting an eye.

My cousin is just a squirm in the crook of my aunt's arm on the couch in the hoary farmhouse. June's sunlight streams in to hit her just below the chin, but still she sleeps. They tell me to sit down in a chair and put her in my arms. She is the first too-fragile person I remember holding, and I am afraid of her, and for her, even in the well-supervised presence of so many relatives. My family chats around me, but I am transfixed by the poreless perfection of her skin, the swirl of her hair, the existence of her eyelashes. The impossibility of her. That she can be so small and still so human. When there are pauses in adult conversation, everyone just stares at her, a collective smile turning up their faces.

At 33, I am not a mother by conscious choice. A set of conflicting feelings bubble up in my stomach every time I hear a friend's birth announcement or receive a baby shower invitation. I worry they're having a baby to fill some void inside of them created by the patriarchy, or because it's expected, or to make up for a lack of vocational success. All the while feeling jealous because at times I too want children and a full life with a family I created, not a fact of my birth. I fear for the intimacy of our friendship, while simultaneously being excited to sew a baby quilt or knit tiny sweaters and booties. Above all I am scared because I don't know how women decide to become mothers, and I worry that my friends didn't decide to be mothers so much as they never decided not to be.

In the third century A.D., two North African Christian women, Perpetua and Felicitas, bid adieu to their families and babies and volunteered to be eaten by lions (well, charged down and shredded to death by a cow, actually, but lions sounds better, no?). Let me write this again: rather than

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be mothers, wives, Perpetua and Felicitas' devotion to Jesus was so strong that they volunteered to be eaten by lions. Perpetua's son spontaneously weaned himself. And, as the Romans would not put pregnant women to death, Felicitas gave birth to a daughter a full month early. Her prayer that she be allowed to die with her fellow martyrs answered. The church canonized both: The patron saints of mothers, expectant mothers, ranchers, and butchers.

On the website *Catholic Playground*, there is a children's coloring page for the two in the *Saints A-Z Coloring Book*. Ignore for a moment the problem of their whiteness—that these two North African saints, peacefully praying before an angry bull, have straight hair, thin noses, and rosebud lips. Ignore the erasure of any class distinction when the caption calls them "friends." Ignore how the word "martyr" masks the brutality of their deaths. That they were executed by soldiers in festivities to celebrate the emperor's birthday—the crowd finding it too difficult to watch two naked young women, "one a delicate young girl and the other a woman fresh from childbirth, with milk still dripping from her breasts," get torn apart by wild animals. Focus instead on what is missing—that Perpetua was one of the first literate women on record. A woman who wrote her own story. That she, against the desires of her father and oddly absent husband, chose her own destiny.

As a sophomore, excited for my first foray onto the stage, I starred as Mrs. Gibbs in my high school's production of *Our Town*. My main job: to pantomime interactions with food (*breakfast, peas, & chickens primarily*) before dying of pneumonia in my late forties. Throughout my high school stage career, I went on to gain pitiable looks from my lithe bodied peers as I donned a series of increasingly unattractive frocks to tackle the roles of Anna Smith, Doris Walker, and Alice Kingsley—mothers all three. These casting decisions no doubt stemmed from the wideness of my hips and pronouncement of my chest as much as my ability to memorize dialogue and sew my own costume. At fourteen years old, I was better equipped to convince an audience I'd pushed out a kid or two than slimmer girls.

To be a mother, to look like a mother, is to look like a sexually mature woman. To be stared at by men in K-Mart even when one is a child and pained by her newly budded breasts when she runs after her friends at recess in fifth grade. Calling a girl a mother, a natural, is just another way society gets to control women's bodies in public spaces—to pressure them into shapes it finds acceptable. To make them remove clothes, first to humiliate, and then to cover them back up to not have to think about the horror of letting animals tear apart bodies that remind us of babies. My body isn't interested in men controlling it (well, not without my consent at least) one way or the other. It's much more in favor of hiking mountains and getting tattooed, both of which have fuck all to do with babies, or dudes, for that matter.

Once a year, at least, I have a dream that I'm pregnant, about to give birth. When the baby comes out, she (always a she) begins by offering a thoughtful critique my uterus: the shape and stretchiness not being what she'd hoped for. Bewildered, I take the baby home where the tirade continues—I am a failure at everything from breastfeeding (my milk comes out too fast) to diaper changing (always too tight). I awaken in a panic of

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shame and have to promise my uterus her IUD will stay put until death-do-us-part to fall back asleep.

Being single at 33, I find myself worrying about when I will next have sex. *Who will I have sex with & do I even want to have sex & should I look for sex & does online dating lead to sex & what if I don't want it to lead to sex & how the fuck does sex even happen when you're not 18 and in a dorm where everyone's so horny a few awkward laughs during a World Religion's survey class can lead to an hour-long make out session in Slade Theatre's catwalk after your roommate's orchestra practice got canceled?* If I'm not having sex, I can't get pregnant, and if the possibility doesn't exist, however remote, that I could become pregnant, have I made my decision? Has my decision been made for me?

I didn't grow up Catholic, but I can imagine the lesson surrounding that coloring book page. Little Suzie colors Felicitas' dress purple after her CCD teacher makes the class watch the St. Perpetua *Catholic Heroes of the Faith* episode. (Again, ignore that Perpetua looks Irish, perhaps? Felicitas, of course, is Black). I'm sure any discussion of the newly born babes is glanced over. Otherwise, if little Suzie happens to be anywhere near as precocious and anxious as I was as a child, I imagine she starts crying once she begins to wonder when her own mother will opt to leave her for a man called Jesus.

As my eleventh summer proceeds, a stack of baby magazines donated from my aunt takes over my nightstand alongside *The Babysitter's Club*, *My Teacher is an Alien*, and Judy Blume novels. Glossy covers with butterball babies trussed up for the camera in a sea of white light angled to make their eyes radiate the blue of July skies. I lecture my aunts and grandmother on the best ways to care for my cousin as we drive to and from the mall. Merits of football versus cross-cradle holds. Tips for naps, appropriate amounts of tummy time, and best-bang-for-your-buck brain-stimulating toys. At my grandmother's house or sitting under the trees near the beach at Woodridge Lake, I shout out her developmental milestones. She lies on my lap, her eyes focus on me, and she smiles. Possibly, it is gas. But at eleven, this feels like my purpose. Like I have a clear sense of true North.

My first period comes within the year. My female family members all smile knowingly when my mother tells them. As if my cousin's magical baby power to capture an audience extends to my uterus. I am first dubbed a natural.

I will fall in love when I meet my friends' babies. I will have sewn them baby quilts and knit blankets and wee sweaters—skills I learned from my maternal grandmother. This is just what you do in these moments. Though they connect me to an unbroken line of women in my family, these activities wouldn't have been pure pleasures for them but work. Skills they needed to perform their job as a wife, and in teaching them to me I was being trained. But my friends delight. My gifts are posted to social media; my talents cooed at as my uterus cries out in fear of its impending death, shaking my core as I breathe through the aftershocks and hold their baby. I will want to ask my friends: *Did you decide to be a mother or never decide not to be one & how did you tell the difference & what's the moment when you knew you wanted children & when did you know you regretted it & when is it impossibly hard & how did you know it wasn't just the patriarchy*

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dictating your desires & when did you first realize your reproductive system had betrayed your body and mind & are you still the girl who used to leap off bridges with me? But I don't.

I also want to ask my friends: *Excuse me how & when exactly did you get your shit more together than me? How & when did you decide to give up on your life/body/ambitions/proper digestive function?* Just thinking those questions makes me feel like an asshole. Some days I want a baby just so I don't have to think about whether I want one anymore.

Thornton Wilder describes Mrs. Gibbs as “a plump, pleasant woman in the middle thirties.” It is no small irony that now, in my middle thirties, I consistently fight back against this perception of myself. My drama teacher saw the course of my body, if not my occupation. To be described as “pleasant” now would wick away at my mental health. To be pleasant is to be powerless. I'd much rather be described as willfully plump—steadfast in my resistance of making my body and my needs small.

To call a woman plump and pleasant is to label her sexless and to label her sexless is to make her irrelevant and to make her irrelevant is to liken her to the dead, which (spoilers!) happens in the third act to Mrs. Gibbs when pneumonia strikes her down. In Act I, she confesses to her neighbor a desire to visit Paris. Dr. Gibbs says no. He fears “it might make him discontented with Grover's Corners to go traipsin' about Europe; better let well enough alone”. It might make her discontent, is what he means. Discontent to shell peas and feed a family without tending to herself. He fears the dangers levied by good, cheap wine and crisp croissants. As well he should.

There hasn't been a new baby in my family in 25 years. As the oldest of four grandchildren, I feel like I'm being held personally responsible for this oversight and lack of growth. I feel shame every time my mother has to coo over someone else's baby. Every time she asks me if she should *still* save my christening gown. When I was twenty-six and newly married, my father would shout in the background, “Is she pregnant yet?” every time I called home.

I know my parents' excitement for me to have a baby is in good faith. They haven't pressured or prodded too much—not in the almost violent ways I've heard of parents doing anyway. I grew up lower-middle class—I know their excitement stems from the joy my brother and I brought to their lives. But I also remember the fights about money; my mother staying home longer than planned because of my brother's autism. I have friends who pay more for childcare than their mortgages.

Felicitas' sister brought up her daughter. Perpetua's family, her son. I wonder if her sister ever told the girl about Felicitas. Imagine learning that your mother felt so little connection to your existence that she prayed for an early birth so lions could eat her. Or that she hated the prospect of her expected maternal role so much that digestion by a large cat was a preferable fate. Or perhaps she served as a cautionary tale to the girl—the dangers of being a woman with a will of her own.

My Kindergarten teacher is young, and I have no doubt seen *Annie* one too many times. I am also aware motherhood is a not a job.

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My cousin's in a master's program now. Living with her boyfriend in Brooklyn, which means twenty-five years have passed since I was first called a natural. I assume I should be able to potty-train babies on command and bring forth breast milk with a secret-handshake-like squeeze of my non-lactating tits by now. Thankfully, these skills have yet to manifest.

If I'm supposed to be a natural (and honestly, the older I get without having had a baby the more absurd this label feels), were Perpetua and Felicitas somehow unnatural mothers for choosing their faith over their children? Is that why their bodies were able to eject them so fully—one from the breast and one from the womb—when they needed them gone? The word natural breaks down under this slight bit of pressure. If motherhood were natural, were “inherent in the very constitution of a person,” it could not be rejected. We cannot reject the natural functioning of bodies: to breathe, to eat, to become pregnant given the right circumstances. But motherhood is a role. A cultural institution as much as a personal choice. But I don't think this definition is what people mean when they remark that I'm a natural with babies—they mean doesn't it *look* natural, the way I hold a baby. Doesn't it look like a thing I was meant to do—much as it was meant to be Perpetua's fate. Her father begged her to consider her son—who he said would die without her—even if she wouldn't consider him. And this is the real revolution in her story, so problematic that it was dealt with early and swiftly by male editors who reframed her story as one of theology. He did not call it for what it was—a story of women rejecting their “natural” roles. Of feeling a pull more powerful than some supposed biological clock.

It's the end of December, 2017—my boyfriend of three years and I are breaking up. He gives me a pleasant, clearly rehearsed speech about how he thinks we should separate because I want children and he has realized he does not. He imagines I may come to resent him if I choose him over children. It's neat. Orderly as eggs in a carton. An understandable difference and reason to separate at this stage of life while there's still time to find someone else. A story to package for friends and families as we both cry—heartbroken—and get credit for facing reality. But it's not the truth. That narrative is too neat to be real. I'd already accepted I wouldn't be a mother with him—at least not the birth-giving kind. I worried too much about how he'd view my body pregnant—the five or so pounds I gain most years around the holidays often a problem for him. Had I gotten pregnant, my uterus' inevitable expansion, pushing out against my abdominals and internal organs as a baby grew, would have pushed him away from me too. That is, if his drug abuse and cheating hadn't already done the job for him.

What I'm trying to say is motherhood necessitates sacrifice: In one instance a body goes to the lions, in another to the physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, and psychological labor of raising kid(s) up from screeching squirm into a more or less functional teenager at which point she can do nothing more than perish from pneumonia. There's a real case to be made here for the lions. At least if she is eaten, there's less chance of lingering resentment and guilt.

What I'm afraid to say is this: I've watched my own mother and grandmothers give up their lives to care for others—set their own needs aside, at

times to the decline of their own health and well-being, to care for husbands and sons. Daughters have always had to be a more self-sufficient lot. And this roots my fear. That I can see myself doing the same with such casual ease that it would be years before I noticed I hadn't written or hiked or read a book or spoken to a friend about something other than my child. That I would become invisible to even myself—that my voice would be less loud. My sense of self less assured. I enjoy the nurturing, care-giver role at times—I love to cook for my friends and family—to bake sourdough bread as a thank you gift, bring homemade soup to my parents when they're sick, or cook apples down into butter and pass tiny jars around to my colleagues in the fall. But I choose to do this work and when I don't feel up to it, I eat grilled cheese for dinner and re-watch *Downton Abbey*, envious of Lady Mary's motherhood at teatime only.

And none of this, of course, is meant to say that women who have children have done so for the wrong reasons, or that women who want to have children should not have them or that they have in some way betrayed themselves or their gender by having or not having, wanting or not wanting, needing or not needing, but rather that motherhood comes with baggage for even the most well-adjusted of us. We have full, rich lives that are generally lacking in overhead bins big enough to accommodate our baggage without it occasionally falling out and bruising our heads.

I want to go back to Perpetua and Felicitas one more time. I want to rewrite the narrative their children may have been told because the more I've read about them, the more I've come to love them. I heard author Elizabeth Gilbert on her podcast *Magic Lessons* say to a mother struggling to find time to do her creative work that "if you model martyrdom to [your children], they will grow up to be martyrs. If you model creativity to them, they will grow up to be creators." Felicitas and Perpetua were not martyrs, at least not in the long-suffering sense of the word. Theirs was a bold and deliberate choice of rejection—an act of creating and choosing. I imagine in the end it must have felt like something sealing. Felt like a settling, deep down in their bones.

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