

Christina Halliday

coming from my mother's body

I know no woman—virgin, mother, lesbian, married, celibate—whether she earns her keep as a housewife, a cocktail waitress, or a scanner of brain waves—for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripenings. (Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*)

They have transferred me hurriedly to a narrow, metal bed. I can feel the hospital shirt on my skin. A soft, thin tissue against the piercing chill of the metal bed, the pervasive, wet-cold of the operating room, the freshly scrubbed hands that are arranging my body—placing my left arm here, drawing my knees up, molding me into a ball on my side. As a rope of pain squeezes breath from my chest, I realize, finally—*we could die*.

Soft, sympathetic touch on my shoulder, “Don’t move Christina. We’re starting the epidural.”

We could die.

“I’m having a contraction, just wait.”

“We can’t wait Christina, stay still.”

We could die.

Minutes before, as my midwife stood helplessly nearby, the on-call obstetrician said to me in a kind, apologetic voice, “Your baby is in distress because you have developed something called pre-eclampsia. We have to do an emergency C-section.” Such an ugly word—pre-eclampsia. It tumbled out of the obstetrician’s mouth and dropped heavily on me—a hot iron of searing memories.

Pre-eclampsia: a toxic condition developing in late pregnancy that is characterized by a sudden rise in blood pressure, excessive gain in weight, generalized edema, albuminuria, severe headache, and visual disturbances. (Mirriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary)

Pre-eclampsia. Part of my maternal alphabet. Legacy from my mother. My body knows that this is a definition drained of all real meaning. My mother's body knows. That we can, unwillingly, become baby killers. Our wombs and blood turning poisonous, deadly. Our fragile babies unsafe and foreign to us. *This is what we share between us*—mothers, daughters, sisters. This sinister gift.

My mother in the hospital in a narrow, metal bed. I was 15 years old. I remember her small, saggy belly bound by a black, fetal monitor. [How could my sister be in there?] My mother asked me how things were going at home and school. I came closer to the bed she was confined to for weeks. Unwashed hair tucked carelessly behind her ears. She talked and moved slowly. Didn't touch me. I smelled old sweat and worry. I was afraid of her.

Why are we enemies to our own children when they need us most? On both of our bellies there is a long, red and raised reminder of the womb that became dangerous. The child pulled out in distress and emergency. The signature of pre-eclampsia. Our own, personal, bodily failures.

Curled in a ball on that too narrow, operating bed. A very young and extremely awkward resident sticks a tube into my spine—he jumbles his words and looks at the senior anaesthetist all the time for confirmation that he is doing things right. I want the resident out of the operating room and I tell the anaesthetist so. He steps purposely forward and I see his benign face in my field of vision.

“Christina, Dr. Thompson is in his last year of residency and he's done more epidurals in the last six months than I have. You're fine.”

No. I'm not fine. But, I can't argue now. I just can't because I am only a small, scared, thin shred of myself and there is no substance in me to fight you with.

I let Dr. Thompson continue.

White, illuminated ceiling. My eyes are taking it in—opening wider. Activity is at the ridges of my vision. Touch and sound are at my border. Do whatever you have to do. I am desperate to hold the boney heel that traced the length of my ribcage when we were trying to sleep. Hungry to run my finger along the perfect, little spine of my silver, skeletal fish. I can't believe it. There is no choice here. My body is for her now. I am for her now.

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The anaesthetic is pumping, cold, down the length of my back. “Can you feel this?” The obstetrician asks, as he drags a scalpel across my stomach.

“Yes, sharp pain. Yes.” They wait.

More pumping, cold, like a wash of water from the garden hose.

Can I feel it? “Yes, sharp pain like a knife. I can feel it.” They wait some more. Through the sterile blanket hung across my chest, I hear low, concerned murmurs. They are saying that the epidural is not taking.

Dion is sitting beside me, whispering in my ear, “Everything is going to be okay. It’s going to work this time.” Before I can even acknowledge what he has said there is more pumping of cold liquid through my spine.

“Can you feel this?”

“Yes. It’s a dull blade now.”

I hear the urgent words, “Let’s go!”

They are slicing me. Down there. Below my cool and exposed centre. I am just waiting for an ending to come. Just tunneling down to a quiet place of no motion, no mind. I have to go here because if I stay with my body I am scared I will die.

The doctors are muttering something about her head.

Soft hands are digging deep. Scooping the earth out of my belly and searching for my root, which is her. Pulling the root but it’s not coming. Instead, the sharpest point is piercing me straight through.

“Can you take the catheter out? It really hurts!”

The anaesthetist appears in my vision again. “I’m sorry,” he says, “there’s nothing we can do about that now.”

All of the sudden there is an immense sense of relief in my belly. The obstetrician announces, “Thick meconium!” The room gets tense.

Someone says, amidst the hurry and concern, “Congratulations, you have a baby girl.”

A baby girl. A person cut from me with a knife. Is she really mine? But what does that feel like? I can’t even see her. I don’t feel proud or elated to have her. I am distant, shocked—nothing.

Someone is squeezing a kitten in the operating room. I hear very scared, very weak meowing. This is my daughter. She is being lifted from my belly and taken to another place in the room. They say she has no breath.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see they are working very hard on her. Dion is muttering over and over, “Don’t worry Christina. Don’t worry.”

Can’t you tell? I am turning to stone now. Closing my eyes and letting words splatter on my surface like rain. I AM worried because this is what I really am. The

failure. The bad mother. The one who cannot love.

My baby, I'm sorry. Because I have to be alone during this most important moment when I should be with you. You are in your own struggle now. And I think I might die. You see, my placenta needs to come out. Doctors, are you doing it? Oh please do it right because I don't want to bleed to death. And my uterus, all stretched and floppy, are you sewing it up? Neatly? I don't want it to rip open with the next child, if there is one. Where are my intestines? I imagine they are carefully arranged on a sterile, blue sheet. Quickly put them back. Good. Keep working. I am waiting to be whole again.

They have given me a polaroid of a tiny, baby girl. Dion is calling her Veronika. There are tubes in her nose, her arm, the top of her right foot. She is peering into the camera with her dark eyes, as if looking for someone. While my mother and sister watch me slowly become myself again in the recovery room, I hold this picture to myself and pretend to be completely enamoured with the little girl whom the doctors say is still in danger.

Dear Veronika:

The nurses want me to sleep but I won't until I feel your warm, new skin beneath my fingertips. They tell me I can see you tomorrow but I am afraid that tomorrow will be too late to become your mother. You may fall in love with someone else by then.

I know I should feel love but right now I cannot feel. There is something wrong with me. I think that when they took you out you were holding my heart on a string. And maybe it's with you now, in the incubator, floating around like a delicate, red balloon. I hope you can hear the gentle whispers of my heart, because I placed them inside before they took you down the hall. This is my love saying your name, soothing you, until this heavy numbness goes away. Please listen and wait for me.