

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

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JoAnna Boudreaux, Kate Golding, Jennifer M. Heisler, Crystal Machado,
Sheila Martel, Ariel Moy, Usoa García Sagüés, Emily Wolfinger,
Diana Aramburu, Rachael Boulton, Marcella Gemelli, Katherine Herrán-Magee,
Mariana Trujillo Marquez, Elisabeth Hanscombe, and more

SHEILA MARTEL

Six Poems

He Can Just Tell

A third grandchild exploded my world as easily
as the first and second. Not gold, silver, bronze—
each is a winner by birth. “He knows we’re
related,” I tell his mother as I hold him.

“He can just tell.” Knowing this boy has led
me back to a yellow college-ruled legal pad
and a Ticonderoga #2 pencil, where I draft
my first new writing in two years. I try to

describe how love for these grandchildren
is not the chocolate Valentine kind.
Rather, the soul thirsted and is quenched.
The soul heeds what the soul needs.

Grandbabies

The line goes on. New ones
here have seen to it, claiming
their turf as they will. I am
christened Mamie, by the first.
Already they are taking charge.
I have built my life brick by brick
by hand with chapters including bad wolves,
sticks, straw, and hot air being blown around,
sometimes by me. I appreciate being
alive in a time where the word
“grandmother” isn’t cloaked in
limitation or a prescription
to clean up the residue
of anyone who came before.
The tale I live is to say
yes to mystery
yes to curiosity
yes to unfolding.
Each grandchild who blesses my life
will be not prince or princess.
Rather, I strive to see each
in simplicity
in complexity
in all of their humanity.

Sparrows on a Wire

At the playground, my toddler
grandson enjoys the slide. His mother
calls my cell phone. "Hello?"
Breathing, no words yet.
She had a doctor's appointment today.
"Mom, there was no heartbeat." Sobs.

My brain, my heart, split in two.
I remain here at the slide,
sending him up and down.
I dare not feel one feeling
of my own. She and I agree
I will keep her son for a few days.

The toddler and I gather up
into the car, stopping
on the way home to purchase
overnight diapers, more milk.
As I place him in the child seat
of the shopping cart in the parking lot,

I catch sight of the incredible
autumn sky, many sparrows
on a wire. I am stopped, struck.
How can it be? How can beauty still
be when my precious one's pregnancy
is going, going and tomorrow

gone?

Mary Cassatt and Mom

Mary Cassatt, the American painter,
painted babies, picnics, and parlours
because those were available
to a woman of her time
place and space.

As a woman of her time
and place, my mother
was cocooned, groomed,
to become wife, mother,
no more, no less. She was

young, and my father was
in love with her. "Did you mind
leaving school because you were
pregnant with me?" My question.
"I hated school," her response.

When I think of my mother
as a person, as herself,
not mine even a sliver,
it seems that silver, even
bronze options, might have

caused that bright-eyed teenager
to sashay down a path filled
with boutiques, beautiful
fabrics, costumes and parties.
A chasm opens. This poet

might not be writing this poem
might not be writing this
might not be writing
might not
be.

Five Generations

Today, it's so accepted,

but back then—
as church-raised girls—
it was all about rushing.

Rushing
into the white dress,
rushing
into vows of eternity,
even if the unions ended
long before.

My maternal legacy:
my grandmother, my mother
and me
all tried on
motherhood early on:
a tried
true
treasured
family recipe.

We were BBA:
Baby-on-way
Before Altar.
There were no guns
held to anyone's head;
only lusting and
love making
that brought
forward
five living generations
of women
on advanced schedule.
That move took us
from a spot of shame,
like blood,
to a photograph worth
sharing, each of the five
smiling, looking like
what we are:
lions moving
with pride.

Emptied Out

i. Firstborn

She is leaving. Again.
At DIA, we trudge up the escalator,
across the walkway to the gate.
We find seats, then speak of the movie, *Titanic*.
It is all the rage I feel inside and more.
My heart beats faster.
“What row are you?”
“Ten.” She continues her story.
“I think they just called your row.”
Hushed whispers, a hug.
“Don’t cry, Mom.”
She turns and walks away.
This isn’t United as the signs
around us insist.
This is sinking,
drowning, fighting for air.

ii. Baby

The first night, the quiet
soothes by its simplicity, ease.
Outdoor sounds enter as ghosts
through walls of silence. Next night,
I sob in bed. “Goodnight, honey,”
I call out as tissues drop onto a pillow.
A week later, I arrive home
into the nothing. I miss her voice,
and all the noise she gave:
her cell phone ringtones, texts buzzing,
her laptop computer too late at night.
I miss her avoiding me.
Sometimes she didn’t look up
from her screen when I walked into her room,
arriving home from work.
“I need you to talk to me, just for a few minutes.
Make eye contact.”
“Okay.” She did.



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