

FEMALE RAGE *and* MY
PASSAGE *into* MOTHERHOOD

BODY

FULL

"A MOVING WORK
FOR NEW MOMS."
—REAL SIMPLE

of

STARS

MOLLY CARO MAY

Body Full of Stars

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For

Mare and Eula and our shared body

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation,
and that is an act of political warfare.

AUDRE LORDE

What we profoundly need are rituals that take into regard
the blood, the shock, the heat, the shit, the anguish, the glory,
the earnestness of the female body.

LOUISE ERDRICH

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BODY FULL OF STARS

The fracture appears. You fall to your knees and wonder: is it situational, historical, chemical, ancestral, physiological, mental? It may be all of these. It may be none. Is it just who I am? Well, it isn't you and it is you. It is an energy you are meeting. Maybe for the first time. Maybe for the thousandth time. But now in a new way. It has a message. It wants to tell you something important. The last thing you want to do is listen. You want out. Get me the hell out. And if you can't get out, you want it gone, exiled, extracted from your essence. However, that's the basic Physics 101 truth about energy. It cannot be destroyed. Yes, you are responsible for how you manage it. But you aren't necessarily it. You are in relationship with it. You start to hear it, ask questions of it, even love it. This can be hard. This can also be easy. Then you ask it to reroute. Please and thank you. You are in a process of birthing some part of yourself. Your whole life is a series of births. We only learn and relearn this by living it.

Labor

"I wonder what the wind is bringing," I say.

"Who knows?" he answers, and grabs my hand. We are walking a long slow walk in late April. Snow edges around tamped-down grass. Small green buds have begun to surface. The wind almost blows my straw hat away and the moon was full last night. I have told my midwife about how it has always affected my cycles, but she says first babies often come two weeks late.

We'll see.

Because it is five days before my due date and I can feel the new mother-me nearby. She speaks to me already. She will walk through the forest for hours with her newborn tucked against her breast. As years unfold, she will pass on some necessary truths: cross many borders, language matters, don't forget to talk to your own body. Maybe motherhood will give her a reason to become a great human.

We duck under some trees and I lurch back down the hill, one hand on my belly, one hand on Chris's shoulder. A few weeks ago, at my yearly haircut, the same two-inch trim because I've never adventured much with my brown locks or my physical presentation, I told my tattooed hairdresser that my husband had started to go gray, a remarkable even blend with his dark, and she said, "Well, what you've got on your hands now is a salt-and-pepper fox."

And she's right, only, he is, of course, more than that.

We've been together for thirteen years and, despite our recent murky distance, he still does it for me on all levels.

When we reach flat ground, a great blue whale urge to rest comes over me. I curl up on the bed. Chris stays outdoors in the wintery mix of spring and rearranges rocks from our garden into a pile for a different garden. I've canceled all my plans for the next few days. My friends near and far know I've entered what I call the cave. My mother walks in from her house next door to where we are living, in her guesthouse, and smiles at me. We are all waiting.

"How are you, sweetheart?" she asks.

"Good, slow, ready. But this babe might wait until May."

"We'll see," she says. "I'm making a smoothie, would you like some?"

"Sure," I say, "thanks," and I watch my graceful mother walk out the door. She lived across the globe, away from her community, when she gave birth to me. As afternoon sun streaks through the window, I scroll through boy names on the phone. Hard to find one we like. We never had an ultrasound but my intuition knows this babe is a boy. We may never get to use the girl name we chose. I glance out the window and whisper it aloud anyway. Then my bladder calls out.

It's hard to remember what it felt like to inhabit a non-pregnant body. I barrel-roll off the bed and stand up. Pop. Water starts to spill from between my legs. It is clear but pale green. I freeze, as if any more movement will cause a baby to drop from between my legs. Drums pound in my chest. What do I do now? My mother walks back in with my tiger dog Bru.

"I think my water just broke," I stutter.

"Looks like it," she says, and for a moment we look down, then a long pause, even Bru investigates. She has told me what her mother told her. My body will know what to do. It is a natural process. I've spent most my life in an intense conversation with my body—this will be one more part of that.

Water broke.

Water broke.

Water broken.

What does that even mean?

We stare as it pools on the concrete floor.

~

I come from brothers—so do my mother, my father, my husband, his mother, and his father. We have only brothers. There are no sisters and no girls, other than the ones who brought the boys into the world. I didn't care about the sex of my baby. Even so I dreamt of my son riding in a lime-green backpack, and of losing him, leaving him somewhere, and the panic. Did he know what a crazy lady his mother had become while he was in utero? At six weeks pregnant, I had perched on a chair in the office of my doctor and friend Holcomb.

"How do you feel—any nausea?" she asked.

"Not a bit. I feel great, excited," I beamed as my hand fluttered over a flat belly. My mother had only one whiff of nausea during her three pregnancies, so the forecast looked good for me. The next week, though, my stomach turned. I began to vomit into toilets, mason jars while driving, bushes behind the hardware store, kitchen bowls, snow, and my own lap. Multiple times a day. None of this is unusual. But it didn't go away after the first trimester. It tapered but stayed my whole pregnancy. My baby was grown on chicken, whole milk yogurt, and oatmeal. I ate nothing green. I took no prenatal vitamins. I pressed my face into grass to get away from offending smells: toast, coffee, forest fires. Holcomb was also pregnant, a month behind me. Her nausea never shifted into vomiting. She explained she had to hold it down, just *could not* let that lid off.

But my lid had blown off.

Part of me knew it was an initiation—to what though, I wasn't sure yet.

Even daily body maintenance became impossible. I stopped brushing my hair or wearing sunscreen. Someone told me metal near my body was bad, so I cut one underwire out of my bra, forgot about the other, and walked around with uneven breasts for months without realizing it. My exuberance about life would kick in from time to time. I'd always been able to get up and try again. But then

something would backfire, like moving too fast too wide and long on cross-country skis and ending up at a chiropractor's office with seized muscles and ligaments around my pelvis.

It was a mild case of hyperemesis.

That would have been the rational explanation. But, being a constant believer in the metaphysical, I wondered, as usual, if my soul had created this situation *for* me. My closest friends knew me well enough to preempt me and say, "This is not your fault; you did not create this." Acid in my throat must be an act of releasing the old. It was necessary for my growth, right? I could also no longer censor what words came out of my mouth, except when teaching writing workshops in town. Somehow my sickness never showed up in front of my adult students or clients. Maybe I could control it then because I had control there. Chris and I had entered a cohabitation of sorts with my parents two months into my pregnancy when they moved permanently to their small cabin on this wild stretch of land in Montana. We had made a home here for two years in our own yurt until the cold and throwing up off the porch in the middle of the night got difficult. I needed the bathroom of the cabin. Their guesthouse was a garage, not yet a guesthouse. I wanted to welcome them to *their* land and then leave to rent a place nearby. But we couldn't both rent and save for the future home Chris would start to build soon on a triangle of land a thousand feet down the driveway. No bank would give a loan to a self-employed artist couple. My parents had been generous in letting us stay.

But the close quarters grated on everyone, especially me.

We slept on their couches, folding up and stashing blankets every morning. We shared the one small bathroom. Intergenerational. People used to live this way. Many still do. It could be a healthy support system. It could also be thunderstorms after thunderstorms. It was probably both.

A viper awoke in me.

Call it rage. Call it fury.

I wasn't unfamiliar with the emotion. It's a part of every human, but never before had it come on in and taken over. Everyone safe enough to be close annoyed me. I lashed out with mean comments. I apologized as much as I vomited. They watched me scream at the

moon. They backed away slowly. Chris and I happened to simultaneously be in the middle of an uncomfortable changing of the tides. We avoided each other or stewed. No one saw me whack the ground repeatedly with a long metal spoon. Friends told me to feel the feelings. C'mon, now. But my rage turned inward as well. How could I be so cruel to the people supporting me? I'd never been a placid human, always slightly impatient, but these maneuvers were new. I was losing opportunities all over the place. My disappointment at not being a radiant pregnant woman was a small part of it. My mother would later say, "You were radiant at times. You just couldn't see it." She would remind me there has always been a good and kind Molly and point out I had lost control of some basics all at once—my shelter, my adulthood, my marriage, my mode of transportation, and my body. There *are* photos of me with my arms around Chris, with a wide smile and gleam in my eyes, with my hands wrapped around the gorgeous largess of my body. Toward the end, a softening occurred. It has to when all you can do is waddle. I would stand on a snowy bridge, tap my belly, and feel a small kick respond back.

"Hey there, sweets."

My babe was already my purifier.

My body, despite the throwing up, had stayed strong through the pregnancy—no swollen ankles, no blood pressure spike, no low iron, no infections, no complications at all. I held on to this luck. It was my ticket back to decency. I had clawed my way through a strange passage toward motherhood. Part of me destroyed by it; part of me fortified. On the other end, we would meet our dear child, eventually move into our house, and my body would no longer be stuck in a state of shock. With that, I would let go of all rage and settle back into the woman I knew myself to be.

It was my, our, backstory.

It's hard to erase the backstory.

~

The white stucco wall talks to me. *Dear, dear, Molly, bello.* It has white on white shapes. I know it knows I know everything will be fine. My

knees tuck up into a fetus position as the fetus inside me feels the squeeze of these contractions. Three almond butter crackers sit on the ledge, lined up and ready to be sustenance later. Someone taught me a three-count breath. It becomes a rock shelter in the ocean. I go there. I rest there. Chris rubs me when I call to him. My midwife drifts through the front door and unbuttons her orange wool wrap with gusto. That might be last time my eyes open. She rubs my lower back. Her hand is cool and I don't want her to stop. She checks my cervix. I am six centimeters dilated, good work for the already nine hours of labor through the night. But I am missing something. I am missing something important. What is it? Fear. I can't find my fear. It's usually so loud, but it isn't here. I peer into dark corners for it. Maybe it is hiding.

Did it take anger with it too?

Someone catches my vomit in a metal bowl.

"I know how to vomit," I say aloud, and laugh between heaves. It is nothing. It is easy to vomit. My midwife tells me that means we are close to transition. When I step into the tub, she warns me water can slow labor. But it doesn't. I keep on trucking. This is what the women in my family do. My knees touch bottom. I drape arms over the edge and sway my body. Another midwife arrives. Hipbones are opening. I feel them parting, making space.

"I can see your hips opening," Chris says from behind me.

What kind of animal am I? I am many animals. My lips are loose. Deep moans. Those are mine. "Good, stay low tone," my midwife says, and then, when my tone crescendos up, she reminds me, low, low, low. I do know how to let go of control. These animals tell me so. They are telling me something about who the child inside me will be. They are also telling me to push.

My body knows what to do.

"Reach down and feel the head," my midwife says.

"Nothing," I say. There is nothing.

She feels between my legs and then asks me to sit up. I don't want to.

"I sure would love to hear that baby's heart rate," she says, and then I am pulled out of the water and, after a few new positions,

someone is putting a too-tight T-shirt on me. The sky outside blinds me until I am lying in the back of a van as it drives fast toward the hospital. It isn't an emergency, they tell me. I look for my fear but it has fled the scene completely. Chris holds my head. My midwife straddles me and holds an oxygen mask to my face. She asks me not to push—over and over.

"Don't push, don't push, try not to push."

I don't understand. I don't understand how to do that. The waves. So many waves—they won't stop, they can't. Does she know she is asking me to stop the ocean? The other midwife, driving, tells me to breathe out in fast short breaths. The animal in me reminds me that all of this, except the van zooming and banking corners on country roads, is ancient. I start to map the route in my mind. We are at this turn. There's that turn. We are close. Once we get there, it will all be over.

"I know you didn't plan to be here," the doctor says as nurses help me onto my back and my eyes close again. Nothing changes. We are only here because they can monitor better at the hospital. For five hours, I push. I'm sure it's been forty years of pushing. Someone get my baby out of me. Are casual conversations actually happening around me? What are they discussing? The nurses are ready to wheel me to the operating room. I don't know any of this. The doctor bends toward me and asks if he can use the vacuum. I gaze up at my midwife. She is surrounded by a halo of fluorescent light.

"It's a good option at this stage," she says, measuring out her words. So I say yes and close my eyes.

He puts the plunger in me.

Now *this* is pain. Fire before the actual fire of my child emerging. Yell, yell, yell, and I tell everyone I'm so tired.

"Open your eyes," Chris whispers to me, and he looks right into me, familiar eyes, love eyes. "You are strong. You are doing this."

I close my eyes again. I don't hear the machines beeping or the sound of my baby's heart rate dipping down, dangerous and low.

"Open your eyes," the doctor says on the second set of pushes with the plunger.

"Open your eyes," says my midwife.

"Look at me," the doctor says.

I look.

"You have to push your baby out *now*," he says.

And the mother bear in me wakes up, shakes out her fur, and roars.

My daughter comes out pink with her fist at her head, raised like a warrior. She comes from between my legs, moves toward my chest, leans toward me, stares right at me, our first gaze, eye to eye. In that stare, she says, *Hello*, and also, *Here we go*.

"Hey," I say.

"I am never doing that again," follows soon after, but I want to immediately disown my words because they aren't true. My whole body twitches with the betrayal of my language. I am just playing some part from a film. Chris is missing out. He'll never get the chance to be a laboring woman connected to earth and sky and animal and heat and dark and light and nothingness. She is the woman I will go on the search for during the messy after that is to come. She knows herself. She knows her body is a planet. I could drop and do one hundred push-ups. I. Am. A. Star. I gaze down at my daughter. Does she miss my womb, how it hugged her and encouraged her to go, go, go meet the world? She looks like my husband's brother. Maybe that is what I sensed when I sensed boy.

Her face, oh, her everything face.

"That was awesome," one of the nurses says, and she points to her armpits to show me the sweat on her scrubs. "*You* were awesome."

The doctors expected a blue baby, a non-breathing baby. Later, my midwife will explain I would have eventually pushed her out without the vacuum but she may have suffered oxygen deprivation. Each push compressed the umbilical cord wrapped around her body, cutting off her source of blood and oxygen. Her fist-and-head combo also made her "a very hard package" to deliver.

Fear sees me, watches me from the corner of a room bustling with nurses. It's back. I don't want it back. It asks me how I am going to raise a girl to love herself or her body. How will she be safe? How will she ever see her own beauty? It goads me, pokes at me with an iron stick.

~

The part of the story I will continue to forget is what happens right after birth. The placenta slides out—purple and dense and all-radiant sea creature. My doctor announces only one tiny perineal tear. May not even need a stitch.

Oh good. Oh phew.

Oh, wait. They are all staring at my vagina. Wait a minute. He sees something else. He has to investigate deep. Ow. Enough. It's over. Let me be. But there is a gash from my cervix to vaginal opening, probably from her elbow. They call for a surgeon. My daughter and Chris are taken outside so the anesthesiologist has the privacy required by law to give me a one-minute spinal tap injection. I want my babe in my arms. Everyone is safe, everyone is safe, we are safe, though. They numb my body after a non-numb birth. The surgeon pulls scrubs over her jeans and flowered shirt. She tells me she will have to spread me *wide* open to get in there. I watch her focus. "Is this your last surgery of the day?" I want to ask but don't. I am grateful a woman is the one sewing my womanhood back together. Still I will forget this scene over and over again. I don't know why we remember what we remember and why we forget what we forget.

~

What I learn: My female parts connect me to all other women. This is obvious and not so obvious. I get to choose what to do with those parts and how exactly to be what we call *female*. But they have a history beyond my own. Though we are finally now starting to recognize the gender binary as false, it has raised me. I cannot separate my female parts from the way my culture has oriented or disoriented me. I happen to identify with the gender ascribed to my anatomy. Female, though, is different than feminine. Everyone has some dosage of feminine energy, but it would seem that only a woman's body has an inherent femaleness. I'm talking pure biology here. A woman's pelvis looks like an alabaster fan with holes reaching up to the sky. Within

the bone structure, layers of pink muscles, fascia, and ligaments cross over one another in an elaborate web of support we call the pelvic floor. It would be more accurate to call it a bowl, shaped much like a hammock. When we leap, walk, and move around, it holds up the uterus, bladder, and rectum—does the same in the male body. The pelvic bowl also supports the most essential part of a woman's potential. The organ of her womb functions as a creative center far beyond growing a child. Our ideas and intuition originate here. It is a portal. It has a pulse. It is here a woman can converse with ancestors, herself, and any energy that shows up.

~

The white sun. The cottonwood leaves. I stand in the dirt driveway and squint up at them. Bru moves his wet nose up and down my legs. He had heard me laboring and then smelled blood. Probably thought I died. For now, my non-mother self is gone. The empowerment of birth has postured me—straight back, proud, a woman who also recognizes not all women, sadly, get to feel this way. This new mother-me appeared. She's still on the astral plane. She's changing diapers like a pro. She is ready to sacrifice. I bend down so he can smell the swaddled package of my daughter. My daughter. Our daughter. We are bringing her home from the hospital. Nothing has ever been so complete. Once inside, I ease myself onto the inflatable orange donut on the rattan rocking chair of my childhood. This isn't easy. I almost slide off. There is a deep painful throb in my vagina. My shirt, well, it's a thin muslin navy button-down with tiny cream flecks. I wore it much of my pregnancy and will wear it almost every day for the next few months. Eventually, I will cut it up and make a handkerchief for my daughter. It makes me feel like I am wearing a sky of stars. "Here, Mom, hold her," I say, and I hand my black-haired daughter to my mother, who will be called Mare. Someone takes a photo of this moment—Mare holding her granddaughter up, while I lean over to gaze down at my daughter as my mother looks up at me, her daughter, now a mother of a daughter. Maybe we inherit the way we move through a passage. Maybe we inherit our assumptions. It is

this matrilineal lineage I want to tell my daughter about. It is this matrilineal lineage I want to tell myself about.

~

My life begins with my mother. Under the red spread of a southwestern desert, she sat with graduate school friends in the bubbling waters of a hot tub. My father tumbled toward her, away from the non-clutch of his family. He chose to study the business of internationals because he had been raised as an international. My mother chose to study it because she, from Illinois, was not an international and thought it might be good to be. She had grown up in a place of neighbors, ice-skating, massive oak trees, and a malt shop. Her mother, Patricia, my Pat-Pat, an unfulfilled woman of study and intellect, had once told her: "Well, at least your hair isn't completely straight, at least you have a *bend* in it." But now here was my mother—in a navy blue bikini, her blue eyes framed by a pleat of dark straight hair. He later offered to fix her bicycle. When he crouched in the foyer, fiddling with a wrench and tire pump, my mother answered the phone call of another suitor while opening the front door to a bouquet of flowers from yet another. She had been a makeup model in Japan in her early twenties. One day, the large Helena Rubinstein poster of her would grace our living rooms in many countries. She was shy, though, a good Catholic girl. My father was a mannered mystery to her.

She wrote a letter to her parents to tell them some of her friends thought this new boyfriend of hers looked like Omar Sharif. Was he "an Arab"? her midwestern father wondered back in a letter. He was as white American as she was, but the dust of other places had settled on him, shined him up so he glittered something different.

When my mother's parents finally met him, Pat-Pat, in an unprecedented move, stood up for her by saying, "I think Mary is fond of this young man." Their union took them to a city, where they lived in an apartment with water dripping from the ceiling. On their first night, my mother cried when her new husband brought her an old shrimp salad sandwich from a deli. They both worked, and my mother walked the pavement as a salesperson for IBM.

They moved across the largest ocean.

They began their life as internationals.

She walked the foreign pavement of Australia for a new sales job. On her free days, she strolled down to the market to meet ocean air and eat fresh peaches and plums. I was conceived and her belly grew round. On that wharf, she wore silk scarves in her hair and ran her hand over her middle. She was sure the child inside her was a boy. The pregnancy was easy. Not much changed. She folded laundry with the same elegance she arranged vegetables on a cutting board. Every member of her family lived nine thousand miles away. But she would have never called herself alone. She wasn't that type.

Her labor was long.

I don't know whether she was lonely.

I suspect she sunk into the process and didn't dwell.

It ended with forceps, for the girl within her was not yet ready to emerge, a pattern that would repeat years later when that girl brought forth her own. Neither one of us ever expected to become a mother to a daughter. My mother's motherhood, as common as ether, began in that stark hospital room.

From your body I come, from my body I come.

~

My mother was told to put me on my stomach. I slept on my back. These days everyone says to put "the baby" on her back. My daughter wants her stomach. She sleeps on her side and we face each other nose to nose. Sometimes she trumpets like an elephant. I am awake always, listening. When I doze in the twilight, the weight of my arm over her body produces a satisfied sigh from her. She also likes to push her arms out between us. I know so little about what she likes or doesn't like yet. Except that she likes my hair. I usually wear it up in a loose bun because the humid climates of my childhood turned curls to frizz. The dry West does good things for it. But now, now I wear it down—messy, female, dark, curly. It's gorgeous to me now. Maybe it's the hormones. I don't ever want to put it up. I don't ever want to put real clothes on. I haven't gone anywhere. I don't know how long we've

been here in the cave. People say a baby can come between a man and woman, but it's the opposite for us—he and his dark eyelashes, the way he cradles our baby, is perfection to me. It no longer matters that I was so sick during pregnancy. My irritation with him has vanished. We sit on the gray flannel chairs nursing. Her little mouth suckles. Her eyes pause at one of my long brown curls, like she's trying to place it, understand it. Does she reach for it? What is *that*? My curl becomes the first world-based pattern she notices. It spirals down to almost touch her. She will have curls of her own soon.

~

My new job is manager of bowel movements. When my newborn, my dog, and I all poop before 10 a.m., it's a good day and the goodness of it morphs me into a super-accomplished woman. I can't seem to clean or cook anything. My mom brings us food every day. She walks through the wooden door with plates of green beans, frittata, chicken Milanese, piles of arugula, turkey chili, yellow rice, elk stew. This is what she does. This is what she has always done with food. I don't know what women do alone, or why it makes any sense to not have others to help tend during this time.

"Do you have a name yet?" my mother asks with a coy smile as she arranges a plate and fork on the pillow next to my girl. Not yet. She is almost a week old. What *is* her name? Is it the one we originally thought of? We wanted to wait to know her. She looks like her uncle and grandfathers, in equal measure. It's a cliché that first children resemble the father, part of nature's DNA test. My mother used to playfully call me Kenitha because my face was so much like my father, Ken. Now family friends exclaim how much I am my mother. But I'm interested in giving her a name that will match her essence.

Chris leaves our cave for a few hours to find a rock for her naming. We are ceremony people. My body hums as I wait. He returns with two white creek stones: one for her, one for her parents. We had made a cairn with them, and the savage wind of last week scattered them to the ground. We place one next to our sleeping child. At the end of my pregnancy, Chris saw the name on a *Harper's Magazine* cover. The

name comes from the Spanish patron saint of peace and speech and the Scandinavian word for sea gem. My childhood Spain. His ancestral Sweden. We don't know yet it is also an old, common name in the American South. It's unusual and old at the same time. In its Greek origin point, the name means *well spoken*. Well spoken. That matters to me. If there is one message I want to pass to my daughter, it is to speak her own truth.

Your language matters, my love.

We call my parents into the guesthouse and tell them.

Eula.

E-U-L-A, I spell it for them.

"Oh," my mom sighs. "Like *eulogy*."

My father tries to recover for her, for them.

They will like, even love it, in a few weeks, but it shocks them now, as it will shock Chris's family too. His parents will respond with silence. My brothers will be the only ones who honor it through the phone lines.

I try not to spit out my response.

"Did you really expect something like *Sarah* from us? You should be happy we didn't name her Sagebrush."

"What were your other options?" my mom asks.

Chris shoots a look to me across the bed: *Don't you dare tell her; don't you dare give away your power on this one*. The trees out the window sway and shake. I swear I hear sandhill cranes croaking nearby. I don't even know what time of year it is anymore.

"I'm not telling you," I say, and hold Eula closer to my breast.

~

It's been almost a month. No stretch marks. Not one. My mother didn't have any either. My stomach seems back to normal, with a little extra softness. Am I even thinner than before? I can eat vegetables again. My nipples are cracked but an herbal balm helps. The bleeding hasn't fully stopped. During my first walk on gravel and grass down to the mailbox, my pad overflows with what I assume is lochia, that watery post-birth fluid. "Maybe it's a ton of cervical fluid," I laugh to

Chris. I've been charting my menses for years now, sorting out what tacky versus creamy versus egg-white means for my health and my fertility. But, of course, it can't be cervical fluid—not in that quantity. My midwife thinks it's probably urine. Am I that out of it not to notice urine? Don't worry, she says. Do some Kegels. I can see a specialist, if necessary.

In general, I am pleased with my body.

Naked always, because there is no other way to be.

I move across the cold concrete floor to the bathroom like a woman in a trance. We don't sleep much, but I knew to expect that. The closest I get to being clothed is black cotton underwear. I've told everyone, including my father, to get used to my exposed breasts. The curtain of life has been pulled back now, so I am stripped down too. Somehow this exposure warrants me an openness with my parents that later will embarrass me. It will be exposure without really exposing myself. I stand in the doorjamb and explain my need to have a conversation with them individually about my beauty/body issues from childhood, how, once puberty hit, my appearance, and talk about it, started to exist in the negative space. "Oh, those May children are good-looking" became "Oh, those May boys are so handsome." I fell off the beauty map and stopped being included in that descriptor.

I became a pretty person who had gone off, like a pear does.

The grass blades outside smell of spring rain, and my newfound motherhood makes me urgent to evolve, let go, be better. They sip cans of lime-flavored LaCroix sparkling water and agree. They are always agreeable with me. I am ready to let go and forgive and ask for forgiveness, I say. My request is a demand. For the first time in my life, I want to tell them everything.

~

On our most recent visit to the midwives, one of them gets direct.

"You need to start wearing normal clothes again," she says to me.

"But they are in the basement, I don't know where they are, somewhere in duffel bags, I have no drawers to put them in," I respond, sheepish, and stare down at my Eula nuzzled against my too-small

blue striped button-down. Are these also worn-out black yoga pants? Yes, they are.

"You need to go down to the basement and get them."

I'm shocked and a little shamed by this command. But I make myself understand she wants me to care for myself because caring for myself means caring for my baby. I get it. Eula, of course, is fine. She's gained the right amount of weight. She latches to the breast well. Nursing is easy. It doesn't hurt anymore. I realize this is lucky for us. So far, all goes well. I'm a little tired. Got to gather my clothing. Look forward to not wearing a pad to catch the postpartum blood. Look forward to getting to know my daughter.

But we are good.

I didn't burst into tears when my milk came in.

I haven't felt any postpartum blues.

I feel supported.

This helps me be attentive.

I sleep and heal when Chris wraps Eula against him and takes her on walks through the woods, up and down hills and under trees and a cloudy May sky, sounds of birds and water. I am tired but it is a clean and purposeful tired.

I am doing well.

We are doing well.

When we get home, I stomp into the kitchen and decide I don't want to put clothes on ever again, especially now that people want me to. Somewhere in the distance, I start to hear a sound, a whisper telling me that labor comes before labor and labor doesn't stop after labor. No one tells you really, the labor doesn't stop.

~

It's a text from Holcomb. During our pregnancies, we hiked together and talked about how much boy energy we both felt emanating from our uteruses. What would it be like to be in her body? So fit. So blond. So considered stunning by everyone. She's been waiting for her little one. And so *she* has come.

She.

Another girl.

"A girl," I whisper to Chris.

We both smile.

Fast small buzzes move like a current waking up within me. We have girls. We can do that girl thing together. They will learn to run fast and climb trees and be strong but also sensitive. They will have menses. We can welcome this moon cycle with love and openness. We can use the word *vagina* or *clitoris* with them. It suddenly feels so good to have a *we* in this. I don't have that with anyone else yet. I don't have a close friend with a girl who is the age of my girl. We can dive into ponds with our little women and teach them to love their bodies. These thoughts snowball as I pace around the house, as I do a little dance, and the snowball grows large and sparkly and powerful until it suddenly crashes.

What if her daughter is more beautiful than mine?

That's an awful thing to think when a baby is born, I tell myself. Who thinks that? No one wants to admit they think that. Stop it. And then sadness rushes through me. I am already worrying about Eula and how she will measure her own beauty. I recognize the projection. This is not something I want to pass on. Stop it, I tell myself, and I walk outside to sip some clear sweet mountain ether.

All. Is. Well. Everything. Is. Perfect.

Change a diaper.

Swaddle.

Eat zucchini.

Fold tiny pants.

~

It's my first day solo with my four-week-old daughter. Chris is going back to work—furniture to make, commissions to complete. Soon he will start to build our house, a one-man job. Goodbye, I'll see you in eight hours. He pulls on his old work pants, squeezes us both, and walks out the door.

Fear wakes up, stretches long wings, and flaps around in my chest cavity.

Please go away.

"We're okay, we're okay here," I say to us, and walk from bed to chair to dresser to kitchen and around again. In his absence, I become incapable of taking care of Eula, or myself. How will I eat? How will I shower? The gentle black ceiling fan now cuts the stale air. Unlike other new mothers, I can never put my daughter in the wrap. She doesn't like being in it with me, even when I offer the boob, because I can't bounce. Bouncing makes my vagina "fall out"—and pee, lots of pee, oceans of urine. If I put her down, she screams a baby dinosaur scream I can't handle yet. There is no way for me to be with her and have my hands free.

Now that we are alone, I need free hands.

"Please let's make this work," I whisper. I frog her legs and start to wrap her to me.

She wails and keeps the wails loud. I try to bounce her. I try to bounce her and a sort of hell breaks loose. Bru, now neglected, noses an empty water bowl I cannot bend down to fill, and as I bounce, pee soaks through my pad and through my unwashed yoga pants so that a puddle starts to form on the concrete floor and he, still thirsty, actually considers drinking that.

And Eula still screams.

One day this will be funny. Maybe.

Today, however, grief sprouts. I didn't want to be this kind of mother.

"Eula, stop, sweets, please stop," I beg her, my lips grazing her face.

Bru stares up at me.

When I call Chris, hours have passed.

He walks in and starts to set things right, unbothered that he had to leave work. He takes Eula. I mop up the mess. I might be crying a little about my failure, crying tears into my own pee, so many fluids. When I glance up, Chris is organizing the mess of everything everywhere as Eula snoozes wrapped against his calm chest, her little mouth open with the relief of it. He puts a gentle hand on my shoulder. A friend with a toddler told me not to worry if I freak out. Everyone freaks out. I plan not to let it happen again.

"I've got to go back," he says after some time.

"Okay, let's try to transfer her."

But as we are mid-transfer to my chest, I remember I forgot—somehow, god—to discard my urine-soaked pad and replace it with a fresh one. Eula must sense this as I secure the wrap. She wakes up. She goes from a quiet sea otter to a trapped and angry bat and I'm halfway to the bathroom, asking Chris to follow, to please change my pad for me. I am determined not to have to hand her over. I can do this. Surrounded by clean white tiles, I hold Eula in my wrap, trying to bounce her with my hands so I don't pee all over Chris's hands. He pulls my underwear down as I crouch over the toilet and try to tune out the crying. But when he opens the crinkly *Always Extra-Long Pad* with Wings, his know-how stops.

"I don't know how to put it on," he says.

"Just figure it out," I snap at this kind man who is just trying to help, who is doing something many men might not do, who I've come, over the years, to expect will accept the grit of body fluids with me without complaint or comment, and then "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," and his "It's okay, it's okay," and by the end of it, I can't tell who is or isn't crying anymore.

~

Friends call and I recount the birth like a wanderer returned from a long voyage. Traumatic, they ask, to be transferred to the hospital that way? No, no, no, just dramatic. I ride on the wild capacity of all women. Women *do* this. Women do this every day. Why don't we remind ourselves of that fact every day? We just move on because our bodies do what our bodies do.

Some days I am a master of the swaddle, of life.

Other days I am a failure of the swaddle, of life.

When Eula nurses, the light turns buttery. New grass shoots have pushed out of the earth. Snow melts. The importance of seasons has never been lost to me. I couldn't live somewhere where nature wasn't a constant presence, a reminder—this too, this everything you feel, it is a moment, it will shift, both what feels good and what feels bad. Her

eyes flutter open and trace shadowy patterns and she unfolds, second by second, into everything I didn't expect.

No one in my birth class has looked at their vaginas yet. No one in my mother's nonexistent birth class would have looked either. Even my midwife gave me a friendly head nod and told me to hold off on investigating. I don't understand this. It took me so long to become a woman who actually looked; I can't stop now.

"Can you look for me?" I ask Chris because to squat over a mirror isn't possible yet.

I lay spread-eagle on the bed and hold myself open. He stands over me—one arm cradles our daughter, the other wields a spray bottle of water and lavender essential oil for healing. I've asked him to hose me down. I won't hide any of this gore from him. I want him to see the place his daughter came from. I know he is willing because he has always been up for anything and that was part of my draw toward him. I choose to trust that he'll be able to make the transition from *this is the birthing vagina* back to *this is the vagina I want to love on*.

"How does it look?" I ask.

"Um," he pauses, squints. "Great, babe," he says, "great." I know he is saying so simply because it is the right thing to say.

When I do look, the landscape has changed. Somehow this used to be there, but now it's somewhere else and where did that go, and what, what, oh god, is that? My midwife reorients me to my anatomy. Oh, okay. She'll find the vulva book so I can see all the vulvas out there in the world. There is a vulva book? How did I not know? I've never seen anyone's vulva but my own. Even the language; it is a vulva, not a vagina. The vagina is inside and, in Latin, means "sword holder." The vulva is outside, everything, the whole package. I know this. I knew this. But I had gone mainstream and called it vagina.

I don't remember my parents calling mine anything other than my "bottom."

I don't remember them talking about it at all.

I don't remember anyone around me mentioning it as a part of the body.

~

My mother walks in one morning and sits down on the rattan rocking chair. I've started to bleed again, big red stripes of blood. Not my menses, more postpartum blood. I've become skilled at disassociating from my body even when I don't think I am, so I don't mention the blood. I plan to will myself toward goodness and tell my mother Eula smiled today, five times. Before I speak, she asks if we've thought about where we will put the luggage in our new house.

Luggage. That is what matters right now? I don't want luggage. I don't want storage. I don't know why her comment bothers me so much.

"I don't know, Mom," I say to end the conversation.

She leaves.

Later, a friend will explain it to me: these moods are normal for a woman who has just gone through the hugest endurance event of anyone's life and a massive hormonal shift while she is adjusting to sleep deprivation and bleeding from a sore vagina and learning how to get milk from her breast to her baby. But because women do it every day, no one really talks about it at any length.

In that moment, though, I decide I don't know how to soothe my daughter.

"She hates me," I say aloud, so Chris will hear, so that everyone will hear, and Eula yanks off my nipple and stares up in my direction. She doesn't need to speak. I see in her eyes what she is saying. *C'mon, Mama, please do not take this all personally*. I am struck by my own immaturity again. Don't take any of it personally. Not this. Not my mom's comment about the luggage.

On this day of not taking anything personally, I walk Eula to the bathroom. I've got her in a football hold. She is wearing butterfly socks—black and white. We stand in front of the mirror.

"There you are, girl," I say.

She does not pay attention to her image; she looks up to the light fixture, notices only the light.

~

June calls me out of the cave.

It is time to birth myself back into the world. But it's a strange

world to enter again. My shoulders have curled around my daughter. My eyes have become a telescope focused on one scene, my world small. Names of other places on the globe evaporate, country, continent, town. Is this how people become tribal and insular? My language has pared down.

I place Eula in her car seat and chug down the road. Just us. I am ready to feel autonomous as a woman in the woods with my daughter. Integrate back into the world. Come down from the astral plane. We are going to take ourselves up to a canyon to hike among lime-green leaves.

Everyone comments on her large cheeks.

They are my cheeks, straight from the DNA strand. When Pat-Pat saw a photo of me, her first grandchild, at eight months old, her words to my mother were:

"Oh gawd, look at those cheeks."

As if my cheeks were a problem. My mother still talks about it. "Can you imagine?" she says to me. "My first precious baby and *that* is what my mother says." I like to hear my mother defend me. I am already defending Eula's cheeks. I will take anyone down.

Eula agrees to face inward, to rest her gorgeous sweaty cheeks on my chest. I hold my breath with the ease of it. Please stay. Please stay. Sun pours through cottonwoods and dapples the ground. We pass an older couple hiking with poles, then a mountain biker. Dogs run past us. I am a woman walking in the woods with my sleeping baby. I am a woman walking in the woods with my sleeping baby. I am a woman walking in the woods with my sleeping baby. And I haven't peed. Is this actually happening? I could burst into a sprint. My feet could lift from the ground and take us to the golden dome of motherhood where, together, we will cartwheel and I will show Eula how to climb trees and roll down hills and jump rope and leap from just-high-enough places because I will be that mom who is body alive.

I start to make plans for everything we can do now.

As we approach the creek, I hear water rushing and stop. Do a Kegel. Do another Kegel, pulse them now. But it doesn't work. I let go. I let go right there. Pee runs down my legs. It soaks my pad. It

overflows, breaks the dam through my pants and into my socks and into my shoes and down into the cracks of the ground. There is nothing I can do. Denial starts to creep toward me. I'm not a senior citizen. I cannot be incontinent. It must be temporary. Once we get past the newborn stage, my body will be fully healed. I rock my body back and forth and shush Eula and watch the coppery water of the creek flow by. I will walk the sticky mile back to my car. I wonder if any other new mothers walk around like this.

~

What I learn: The *wounded woman* archetype lives on the pocked streets of our every day. We are not immune from her. Should we be? I am not immune from her because I am her and—truth—have ached to become different iterations of her my entire life. We have grown up watching her in films, reading her in books, witnessing her in each other. Unlike other women, she is given cultural permission to lose control, go wild, and express the unexpressed. Of course, both men and women judge her for what appears to be weakness, but that doesn't stop her. Where does she come from? How old is she? When patriarchal rule swept over the world in the early 1200s, it began to overtake and bury land-based, matriarchal ways. This sounds like a gross overstatement. It's not. Mother Earth, and by proxy, women, became feared for their femaleness. Enter the dominator culture. Enter suppression. Enter extreme imbalance. Fast-forward to modern life where very little has changed. These days, in the coastal space of new motherhood, I stand on a weedy edge. What do I feel? What do I watch for? What has festered within me for years? Where am I in my conversation—because every woman is somewhere in her conversation—with the wounded woman?

~

Because we are a culture focused on the singular act of birthing, no one tells you what comes before or after birth. Not really. How can they? It's different for every woman. There may not be one narrative.

However, there is one truth. Before and after are not times where all you do is glow. These are passages full of rocks and caverns and shards of light. Maybe we protect the uninitiated women (and men). Maybe we hope they won't lose themselves like we did. Maybe time passes and we forget what we wanted to tell them in the first place.

Maybe we are scared to put the words *baby* and *hardship* in the same sentence.

During our final checkup, I lean toward my midwife and hide the subtle anxiety I am feeling with a joke.

"My vagina still feels like it's falling out. Seriously."

She assures me some new mothers feel this way. Somehow I grew into a body-focused thirty-three-year-old woman and didn't know this sort of thing happened at all, or was common. Do not worry. Oh, good. Even though I'm prone to pre-anticipate problems, I've assumed these physical issues fix themselves. I've had to in order to get through my days. I assume all the mothers out there are simply women who now walk around with a new demographic label: women-mothers. They may always have a belly pooch and wider hips, but I assume the body does eventually return. They run and leap and show their kids how to cartwheel. They make love. They walk twenty blocks no problem. They groove on the dance floor. They run marathons. They work manual labor. They scale mountains. They carry children and books and groceries and canoes and computers and bags of garden soil on their backs. They go back to moving like they used to.

I'm not wrong.

That is most often the case; or, it has been historically. But the path ahead for me will not be so textbook. My body has something else in mind. My body apparently needs to break down to get my attention.

I lie back for my internal exam. Chris dances around the room with Eula, swoops her up and down and sings to her. My midwife asks me to do a Kegel around her finger.

"Can you squeeze?" she says again.

"I did," I say, lifting my head. "I did, I am, can you feel it, I am right now, I can feel it, can you?"

"No, I can't. You have very little vaginal tone," she says.

"But *I* can feel my tone," I say. "Let me try again."

"It's okay, let's sit down."

We get comfortable on the couches. I reach my arms out for Eula and lead her to my breast. It's been six weeks. How could it be? I am ready to feel the collective warmth of leaving this pregnancy and birth journey on the high note of how easy and lucky breastfeeding has been for us, how healthy Eula is, how fine I am too. After a few wrap-up notes, our midwife shares how great it has been to work with us. Behind her smile, I can tell she has more to say; behind her calm voice is a seriousness I don't recognize yet. She writes down the name of a nurse who works for a urologist, a woman who is "really so nice."

I'm not sure why I need to see a specialist.

I don't know any other new mothers who have been to a specialist.

And why does she feel the need to tell me that she is really so nice?

I wait. I wait longer. Let the pause hover between us like a balloon.

The world before me goes blank. I can't locate myself in my own future.

She takes a breath.

"Molly, you have to trust that you *will* regain bladder control again, you *will* have satisfying orgasms again, you *will* feel strong again, you *will* experience vaginal tone again."

I nod my head.

I act as normal as you can act when a bus slams into you.

It hasn't occurred to me not to trust any of that until this exact moment when she tells me with such concrete sentences that I must trust it. Because now it's clear I've been in a sort of denial—a woman who has told herself all of the strange or bad would go away, away, away. Three days before Eula came into the world, I sat in the forest and made a verbal declaration about the birth: *I will soften and attune to my animal body and all will be well*. It's as if I called in what would be a continued request of myself from myself for years after.

I don't know where this all leads.

I'm not ready.

All will be well. But all is not well.

Little do I know this moment is the middle of the beginning of a

two-year quest for my health, a crawl across the parched desert where I will question everything I once knew about my body, about what it means to heal, about the woman-mother I so wanted to become.

I'm about to lose my whole sense of self.

I'm about to pull those I love down with me.

I swallow, stand up, and thank her for her services with a hug.

When we walk out the door, I step into the sun a shattered woman.

The Girl Who Climbed Trees

On a brown porch, eucalyptus trees reached long scented leaves down to us two-year-olds. The dense forest called out—*Girls, girls, girls, be aware of what it means to be a girl.* We lived in Australia, on a continent made of songlines and the outlaws who paved over them. My friend started to cry and the prance in my legs slowed down. I didn't know why the tears but our adults moved around her like bees, humming, cooing, bending, and hugging. They tended to her unravel. Her blond curls everywhere. My brown curls limp.

This is my first memory.

This is where my body mythology began.

I had been born into a family of beautiful people. They considered me a beauty too—*those blue eyes, I love you in that smocked dress, you are so pretty, pretty girl.* We were internationals and yet we were traditional. My father went to work and provided. My mother stayed home with me (and then my brothers and me). She made dinner every night, stroked our foreheads with her smooth, cool hand, welcomed us with a bright smile, a new idea, how about we bang on pots to hear the sound? Her beauty was an important part of the familial equation. Corporate trips. Jewelry. So many silk scarves. Even when she got on her knees to scrub tiles, she never sweat or appeared disheveled. For my mother, self-decoration was an art, a pleasure of her own.

But my particular set of young eyes only saw the social agreement.
Pretty Matters.

I wasn't one of those buttoned-up, tidy children. For my first five years, I knew only humid islands. When we lived in the Dominican Republic, near a busy dirt road where men sold avocados and hearts of palm, when we lived in a place where pale-skinned people like us had dark-skinned maids, a woman would come to our small stucco house to give my mother her weekly massage. The air clung to windows. It dripped down seams and pooled in cracks on the concrete patio. Curls matted to my forehead. Sticky was all I'd known. I stood in a doorway as my mother dropped her coral dress and draped her naked body over our wooden dining table. Like her own mother, she called her butt her "rear end." I plunked myself on the cool red tile floor underneath. Here I could be part of it all. My beautiful mother's red toenails on the edge.

I thought every mother must be a painting.

I thought every woman was meant to be a painting.

With my mother's family, beauty would become the ground cover of femaleness. My same-age cousin Lauren and I met on the steps of a cathedral in Chicago. Wind blew and papers skittered along the concrete. We could barely speak. With a bottle in one hand, she toddled toward me in pink satin. Someone nudged me forward in my white cotton. It was the start of her in dresses-that-pooof and me in dresses-that-tie-in-the-back, her blond and my brown, her inhibition and my shy. She would become the closest thing I would ever have to a sister.

My body both wanted beauty and wanted to forget about beauty.
Confused.

I grew into a girl with deer legs. We moved again. The willow tree outside our L-shaped house in Spain became my ally. Smells of laundry detergent wafted from our outdoor washing machine and my arms pulled me up branches. My legs latched. I hung upside down and inspected the dead crows below in our run-down pool. Hot breezes grazed against my brothers and me. From me, they learned to leap from limb to limb. Somewhere a family of iguanas trotted through the brittle grass. They didn't scare me. At our international school,

the jungle gym was my home, climb higher, bend further, backflip off the swings.

My parents, though, might say I was a cautious child.

I was as reckless as a piece of toast.

I was as daring as a turtle.

But I was sure of how my body moved.

"Stop picking," my mom would say when my hands found knee scabs. I couldn't stop, though. What did these freckles on my body mean? What was that? Would my toe feel better after the bee sting and why did the bee sting make it hurt anyway? Was there a reason for that? I wanted to know all about my body. My mother interpreted my curiosity as worry. I interpreted her "Don't worry about it" as non-listening. It would take years to develop the language to correct each other.

I made plans for the strong woman I would become.

Fast runner.

Tree leaper.

My sneakers crunched on the gravel of our schoolyard. My friends and I sized each other up without knowing we were doing so. I wanted to rub my body against my blond friend—to get as close as possible to her face, mouth, hair, to play house and cave with her, as if our closeness would make me more like her. My arms clung around her neck at birthday parties. I would not release her. I wanted to make her mine, make me her, make her me.

Meanwhile, my mother lifted heavy things. She hauled terra-cotta pots. I saw her kill spiders, lug bags and bags of groceries, and muscle large bottles of drinking water from car to house. Once, when we drove up to a dead horse on a dirt road, she got out to inspect, swatted flies, and told us horrified kids it was fine. She rarely asked for help from a man. She never shrieked. Somehow she did it all while wearing a pear-shaped ivory necklace and pants that never smeared with dirt. When my parents hosted dinner parties, Fleetwood Mac played loud on my father's stereo and she appeared from behind our bamboo furniture like a doll.

Lipstick.

Clothes ironed.

Big white smile on her pretty moon face.

On one of our summer vacations to Illinois, my parents gave me a Get-in-Shape Girl kit for my seventh birthday. The 1980s had provided it, everything I had ever wanted in a gift. Lauren and I darted around on soft grass all day. Smells of boat gasoline and lake water and sunscreen stuck to our girl skin—then Lauren got sick and went to the doctor and I was left to play with the set of small weights, jump rope, wristbands, and cassette tape. Under the oak trees, I pumped iron in the proper amount of reps. Be as strong as a gymnast. In America, on magazine covers at the grocery store, blond women posed with blank looks on their faces. In my cultural home context that was the definition of beauty. I wanted strength instead, but also whatever it was that would make me desirable. Later, when Lauren came back, we flopped belly-down on the grass in our green and pink swimsuits, our legs stretched long behind us, our faces pressed together. In her husky woman voice, Lauren told me she wanted to be just like someone called Marilyn Monroe and that she had been practicing how to French kiss with her pillow. I pretended to know what she was talking about.

Back overseas, I greeted my backyard full of lizards and porcupines, led my animal figurines outside for fresh air, and got back on my bike. We were surrounded by low hills. The sun warmed my legs as I tested my speed. Freedom spread over me again and my eyes closed to take it all in. Then my face hit gravel. I stood up, tasted blood in my mouth, and ran with my hands out toward the house, screaming. At the hospital, I lay on a gurney in the hallway and stared at aqua-colored tiled walls. My parents whispered nearby. Eventually, the doctor stood over me and announced they wouldn't have to stitch it.

The skin flap that attached my top lip to gum would grow back.

"Let's go home," I said. My brothers had cracked their heads open on pool edges and rocks. They knew about stitches. Not me. After sundown, tucked into my yellow bed, I touched my mouth and absorbed a new electric knowledge.

The body could heal on its very own.

This was how the body worked.

My mood, unlike my brothers' moods, shifted based on how my body felt. That would become truer and truer as I grew up. These were the surest years of my life—two to three to four to five to six to seven to eight years old. My name was Molly May and I was an older sister and I had brown hair and blue eyes and I wanted to live in trees. Only from a great long distance was I aware of what it meant to be in a human body that was specifically girl.