

ABOUT GRUBSTREET

Founded in 1997, GrubStreet has grown into the nation's largest and leading independent creative writing center. GrubStreet is the place where writers develop their craft – and themselves – through the power of writing and sharing their work. GrubStreet offers hundreds of creative writing programs and events for writers from all backgrounds and ages at its Center for Creative Writing in the Seaport, in many Boston neighborhoods, and online. Scholarships are available for all offerings, and many programs are free. At its center, GrubStreet also hosts a community lounge, a podcast studio, Porter Square Books: Boston Edition, café Fabulist, and a Writers' Stage. Learn more at grubstreet.org.

Thank you to GrubStreet's donors for making this class series, and the resulting anthology, possible. *Our Bodies, Our Stories* is the inaugural collection of work from GrubStreet's Our Times, Our Stories class and anthology series. Each year, with help from our donors, GrubStreet will offer free and low-cost classes on a pressing contemporary theme, and distribute a free e-book and print anthology with writing that emerged from the series. To support GrubStreet's Our Times, Our Stories series, please visit grubstreet.org/give/donate.

OUR BODIES

*essays and poems on pregnancy,
abortion, miscarriage, and
reproductive justice*

*writing from
GrubStreet classes*

OUR STORIES

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Our Bodies, Our Stories

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Preface

By **Erin Weiss**, Director of Programs at GrubStreet

In the fall of 2022, after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, GrubStreet offered 6 free and low-cost nonfiction classes on writing about pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, and reproductive justice. The class series was called *Your Body, Your Story*, and had over 120 registrations across the classes. Our intention for the series was to help writers highlight the profoundly personal experience of pregnancy, and the profoundly personal choices we must be allowed to make about our bodies, and ultimately, about our stories. *Our Bodies, Our Stories* is a collection of the essays and poems that emerged from this series.

Content Note

The pieces in this anthology deal with bodily trauma. They are stories about pregnancies. All pregnancies, no matter how they came to be, and no matter how they end, involve trauma to the pregnant person's body. You will read about pain in each piece. Some of the pieces collected here involve violence and assault; many involve loss; most involve systemic injustice; all involve blood. Please give yourself the time and space to read slowly, and take breaks.

These pieces do not come with individual content warnings. Please proceed knowing that the content here may be upsetting. The trauma inherent to all pregnancies is an essential consideration for anyone weighing a person's right to choose what happens to their bodies, and to their stories.

Introduction

By **Kavita Jablonka**, Your Body, Your Story Workshop Participant

In the fall of 2022, I had the pleasure of participating in GrubStreet's workshop series, Your Body, Your Story, which was exactly what I needed at the time. I had been trying, unsuccessfully, to become pregnant for more than a year, after suffering a second trimester loss the previous year. Adding to my distress, the insidious thought that I deserved this bleak path because I chose to end a pregnancy several years before haunted me. I felt painfully unworthy of motherhood and viewed the infertility I now faced as some sort of punishment for my intervention into a fate I did not know was meant to be. Of course, such logic doesn't make sense. I knew having that abortion was the best decision for the single, financially struggling graduate student I was back then. But believing I was responsible for my misfortune is the woeful place my mind had settled after a year of heartache. Layers of frustration, grief, and shame had compounded to create a wall around me that I felt compelled to sustain, yet knew I needed to break through to heal, learn, and grow.

Writing has always been my favorite form of catharsis, but I struggled to even journal about my experience. In fact, before participating in two of the workshops GrubStreet offered, I had not shared my story publicly let alone examined my feelings in any real way. I hated that underlying my feminist thinking and values lurked a culturally inscribed insecurity about what my struggle to conceive said about me as a woman. Spend two minutes on social media, with its unceasing pregnancy announcements, monthly baby updates, and kid-centric content, and it's not hard to believe that no matter how far we've come, fertility is still a strong marker of ideal femininity. I dared not admit I wanted admission into a club I found so annoying. I wanted to not care. But when I saw GrubStreet was offering a series of workshops on pregnancy, abortion, and miscarriage, I knew this was my opportunity to explore what I had been avoiding. I am beyond grateful for the space, community, and thoughtful instruction GrubStreet provided through these workshops to do just that and more.

Through the workshops' exercises, readings, and discussions, I was finally able to put my complex emotions into words and learned more about the art of crafting narrative, especially one so exposing and, sadly, controversial given the politics of abortion and cultural restrictions on bodily agency.

I was struck by how awkward I felt at first, sharing my struggle to conceive so openly, even in a workshop with a subtitle that left little room for modesty or confusion. But each week, I became more comfortable sharing intimate details about my life and offering feedback on the stories my peers so bravely shared with me. We didn't all come for the same reasons or arrive with the same experiences. Many came to write about the complicated joy of motherhood and a few about choosing a life unburdened by it. Some, like me, came for relief and to process feelings about personal hardships. Others had a more purposeful orientation to their writing. We were all still reeling from the Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* just a few months before. Several writers in our group remembered what life was like before *Roe v. Wade* and personally fought for the reproductive freedom that was now in jeopardy again. Our motives and backgrounds differed, yet an unmistakable bond developed between us as we did the most natural and generous thing we could do: just show up and be present for each other.

Over the course of those eight weeks, I became a part of an intergenerational collective of writers whose vulnerability, strength, and resilience inspired me. Hearing from others about their experiences of childbirth, parenting, fertility treatments, miscarriages, and terminated pregnancies broadened my perspective on my own pregnancies, their endings, my undeterred desire to become a mother, and the unavoidable pain of having to make hard choices. An intimacy developed between us. No matter how different our stories are, or our reasons for telling them, we are connected by our shared capacity to bring life into this world and by the ambivalence inherent in bearing this responsibility. To paraphrase one of my workshop peers, at some point, every person who is able to bear children must make a choice to do so or not—that is a fact of our bodies with which we all must contend.

This anthology presents a sample of pieces generated by the productive conversations and reflections that emerged in these workshops. Like any anthology, it only scratches the surface of the themes it brings together. Still, the range of writings included honors the diversity of experiences, emotions, and perspectives that define this vast landscape and shines a light on the unspoken truths of our bodies—truths that are all too often ignored, derided, or taken for granted. It is not always easy to tell our stories or read them, for that matter. Readers might find themselves provoked or unsettled by topics explored in this anthology. Please take care to read at a

pace that makes sense for you. Taking breaks may be necessary. As a result of these workshops, I was finally able to write about the pain of ending a wanted pregnancy, and gained so much from doing so, but I have chosen not to share it with the world just yet, or ever. And that's okay. Being in control of our own bodies and their narratives means getting to decide when, how, and why we share them with others. I have so much respect for the authors included in this volume and have learned so much from what they have chosen to share with us.

To these authors, thank you for sharing; and to my workshop peers and the readers of this anthology, thank you for caring.

For My Daughters and to the World

Jessica Hart Curtis

ESSAY

“How big was she?” My 6-year-old asks.

“She fit in the palm of my hand.”

“How come I don’t remember her?”

“You were two-and-a-half and you never saw her.”

“How old was she?”

“She grew inside me for 16 weeks. Usually babies grow for 40 weeks before they’re born.”

“Did NeeNee have any babies die?”

“No, but Grandma had two die.”

“Two?”

“One stillborn, the baby died while she was pregnant and one died at 6 months old of SIDS. I remember him.”

“Did Grandma have a choice?”

“No. Grandma didn’t make a choice. Dad and I made a choice.”

“Why?”

“We love your sister so much, just like we love you and we didn’t want her to suffer.”

And I didn’t want to suffer and I didn’t want my marriage to suffer and I didn’t want my older daughter forced into responsibility for her sister when we die.

My therapist recommended I withhold the choice portion of the story, to speak of death, but not abortion. To wait until my daughter is a teenager and then give her the whole truth.

By the time my daughter turned four, it felt like a lie. How could I mislead my child for years and then on some random future day reveal that we killed her sister?

It felt imperative that I explain abortion, explain our choice. Every year at school they honor World Down Syndrome Day.

I remind my daughter of her younger sister, "That's what Alexandra had."

"Alexandra had Down Syndrome?"

"Yes."

"People live with Down Syndrome?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't Alexandra live?"

"We chose for her not to."

Our most recent bedtime story has been "Odder" by Katherine Applegate. Toward the end of the story tears streamed down my face. My daughter asked, "Why are you crying?"

"Because the baby otter was born dead."

"It's sad for you because you had a baby die?"

"Yes."

Before we even conceived our beloved Alexandra with Down Syndrome, I vowed I would speak truth to my children's questions.

Let them trust me. Let them feel I'm a safe haven. Let them know I'd never mislead them. Except when it comes to the Tooth Fairy, Santa, the Easter Bunny and that darn elf. But if you ask my daughter where they live, she'll tell you, "In the Land of Make Believe."

So maybe the truth will dawn on her slowly. Maybe she'll be mad at me. Maybe she'd make a different decision if she were me.

Maybe she'll hold fast to her conviction that she never wants to have children.

As I held Alexandra in the palm of my hand and then on my chest, I covered her cooling body with a blanket I had sewn.

Scraps from the shroud are now a comforter cover in Barbie's dream house.

Alexandra was so cold. I returned home and held my older daughter as long as she would let me. She was so warm. So alive.

It's been four years since we said goodbye. Three years since my rainbow was born. I now have two living daughters and they have one guardian angel.

At first, the invisible weight of society's judgment was suffocating me. I was pressed flat. Gasping for who I could whisper a word to. Termination. It took two years before I could say abortion.

Three years before I could tell the world I had a termination for a medical reason. Four years before I could say to everyone, "I had an abortion."

Now there is nothing left to reveal. No shame to be hidden.

Let none of it be secret. Let it be facts. My deepest grief opened me up to transcendent joy. And I would choose that grief again.

I see the families walking the other path. Making the other choice. All our choices from love and self-preservation.

How do I want to live my life? How can I live my life?

I contemplate my photos of Alexandra, her impossibly small body against my heart. I don't know if/when I'll ever show my kids the photos of their sister. My older daughter asked, "What did Alexandra look like? Did she look like me?"

"Too soon to say. Her skin was still translucent."

I held her for hours and left the hospital without her. My baby. My precious, beloved baby. May my children know my limitless, boundless, unquantifiable love for all of them. May they know the truth of my choice. May the world know.

Triplets

Tamara MC

POEM

We named them: Fuchsia, Turquoise, and Black Ivory.

The moment they were fertilized, before they had even become fetuses, everything about them had been genetically determined.

How do you speak about losing three babies? Technically they weren't babies, but blobs—fertilized eggs that had turned from two cells, to four cells, to eight cells. On the fifth day, they turned to blastocysts, before they would become an embryo. And, only by the twelfth week, would they have become official fetuses.

On October 24, I abort Fuchsia, Turquoise, and Black Ivory over an eight-hour period, from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. Throughout the night, my toilet fills with blood and clots. I don't flush. Each time I run to the bathroom and release, I turn on the light and stare at my babies. I collect their every bit and piece.

After my blood ceases, I reach into the red water, scoop my babies up, and clutch them one last time. I bring them close to my chest and then up to my mouth. I kiss. Slowly they trickle through my tensely closed fingers running down my lips, chin, and neck. They cascade down the front of my white nightgown before they splatter onto the cold hard floor.

Bloodied lips and all, I huddle over them. I pray. I unwind toilet sheet after toilet sheet after toilet sheet. I wipe the ground over and over until most of my blood has been placed back into the bowl. I lean over the seat, hold it with both hands, and hunch over. I stare one last time at Fuchsia, Turquoise, and Black Ivory. I flush.

How Tamara Got Her Breath Back

Tamara MC

POEM

I.

Fog filled the sky
I couldn't see behind, in front of, or below me
I watched Blazer as he scampered
Smelling the bush
The concrete
The car tire

Coyotes were howling
A dog was barking back at them

We took a different path
Charles held the leash
I held myself back
From screaming at him

He was insistent to know
What it was about my things
That made them so personal

He couldn't love me
I said to myself
I don't feel protected and safe

We passed more Christmas houses
Passed a house with a stuffed animal collection at its front door

We passed my ex boyfriend, Josh's house
I noticed a silver car
It must be *her* car
The RV was still parked beside his Tacoma
I wanted to run inside
To the home that used to be mine

I wanted Josh to protect me with his gun
To get on his Harley with his biker friends
And escort me through life

Charles didn't speak
A dog yapped at Blazer

II.
I felt gravel on my bare feet
I was unable to put back on my flip-flops
Cross-legged, I focused on my breath

The brighter greenery in certain leaves
The black beneath her fingernails
Wondering if she was a potter, or a gardener

My sheets filled with stones
Turning over again
Swiping dirt from underneath my right hip
The white cotton tenderly hugging my skin
He breathed in through his mouth
And out through his nose
The flaps on his lips trembled

I had a hole in my purple leggings
I wondered if Norman the Buddhist noticed my skin
My long blond hair strand curled up on my left leg
Was I getting my breath back?

III.
In the ER they ask me to rate my pain
Maybe a 2, I say
I'm not in pain
I can't breath
We will take you for x-rays, the triage nurse says
To protect the baby

IV.

He shot me in the butt
The hormones seeped into my musculature
Charles, I say, as I always do
Avoid my sciatic nerve

I feel the liquid move from the tip of the needle
Piercing my skin
The sting
The puncture
Like a three-dimensional spider web
Filled with air and hope

The hormones scurry from my hip
To my ovaries

They expand
As my lungs deflate

V.

I receive a call from my primary care physician
Your D-Dimer test came back
It's very high
You must go to the ER immediately

We were walking Blazer when I got the call
I'm leaving, I tell Charles
Charles doesn't offer to come with me
He dresses as usual
Gets ready for work as usual
Does his usual
As my lungs collapse

Trembling I turn the wheel of my Honda
Try to keep my car moving straight
A new triage nurse is at TMC now
She looks at my files
You were here last night, she says
Yes, I say
What's your pain level?

Still a 2, I say

We will have you see a doctor immediately

Ten minutes later, I am called back

Last night, we did an x-ray

Today we will need to do an MRI, the doctor says

VI.

My babies, I scream

The tech comes to get me

I have babies inside my belly!

Babies? he asks. How many?

Three!

VII.

I walk by myself for an hour

I'm talking to you, God

I don't stop

Someone is listening

Never

Tamara MC

POEM

: i thought we would have babies together
: i thought I would be wearing maternity clothes from “Destination
Maternity”
: in the mall on Sunday we sat
: at the Tucson Mall drinking “Gloria Jean’s Gourmet Coffee” we discussed
: our baby
: the baby we would have together—Fuchsia was her name
: i’m in New York; you’re in our condo in Tucson
: the temperatures are in the 60s, turning to Fall
: here I’ll have a change of seasons
: the sun is always out in Tucson—always summer—always sunny
: “you’re going to have a do-over” you said
: “this baby is going to be different” you said
: “the father is different,” you would say
: you followed me for 26.2 miles
: twins—we planned
: fuchsia and Turquoise
: i would take Fuchsia to dance, dress her in pink
: you would take Turquoise to football, basketball
: i saw your long arms and legs in them
: i saw Fuchsia’s curls
: i saw my daughter
: “you’re not too old,” you said
: “you have the eggs of a 25-year old,” you said
: six months ago, we break up
: for three years we try to make a baby
: you fail to tell me you don’t have sperm
: you fail, Slim Pop!
: i’m lucky now if I have one or two remaining eggs
: no one, NO ONE will be able to impregnate me ever again
: you stole from me
: you stole the last years of my fertility
: you stole Fuchsia and Turquoise
: i will never have another baby again
: never

: never
: never
: never
: never
: never

: one day we are fertile, and then the next day we are not

Good Job, Mum

Lisa Flanagan

ESSAY

The youngest vomits as he runs up the stairs trying to reach the bathroom. The husband follows panicking about the wall paint. Mr. Stubbs, the teal green parakeet, flies first out of his cage, into the window, and then once around the dining room and up the stairs followed by the dog snapping at the air until the vomit distracts him. The ten-year-old wants the focus to return to his birthday, and the 87-year-old grandfather taps two fingers on the edge of the table hoping you'll get him a cuppa. The eight-year-old is helping the twenty-something nephew catch Mr. Stubbs who has now flown back into the dining room and perched on the crepe paper festoons. The roast chicken is still pink on the inside and could use more time and the husband is yelling from upstairs that he needs help because the vomit is too disgusting for him to pick up. You're a mum.

...

A decade before Mr. Stubbs is on the lam and you have three kids, you learn college friends Mark and Paul are having their first child by surrogate. You're 36. Gay men are having children before you are. Why the hesitancy? Is there ever a right time? Will you be an unfit mother? You're a little flighty; you're rather depressive. Maybe it's now or never. After a month of trying, you're pregnant.

...

Everybody has so much to say and tell you about you now that you're pregnant.

The young long-hair Broadway convenience store clerk with a waxed mustache admonishes you for your daily Butterfinger habit.

"They're bad for your teeth you know."

The old Coptic Egyptian doctor doing your amnio lets you know he doesn't really want to do it.

"All children are wonderful" and "You're not so old, but don't use the subway today."

The homeless man selling *Spare Change* in Harvard Square wants to touch your belly when you pass by on the sidewalk.

“Hey, Baby Mama, you’re looking fine to-day.”

The neighbors are clear.

“You can’t keep a stroller in the hall” and “Your apartment is too small for a family.”

Your boss lets you know you’re not rehired for the next semester.

“You won’t want to teach when you have the baby.”

...

While pregnant you dream that you give birth to a squirrel which is trapped under the dishrack-caged and nervous. This squirrel is the needy baby who will never settle, busy doing nothing, big eyed and wild. Or maybe it’s what you will be too- stuck, confined, restless.

...

As contractions roll through your body making every time pause and stretch for minutes on end, your husband searches for CDs so he’ll have a great soundtrack for the birth.

“Eddie Palmieri or country swing from the 30’s?”

“I dooooo.....n’t really care.”

The cramping left words suspended and the pain would inch down into parts of your body you never considered before. You’ve been at this since morning when the first wave moved through you as though you had taken too big a bong hit, and you were suddenly in a new space and time where your body asserts control. You walk to Johnny’s Foodmaster to pick up some bacon hoping it might “flip that baby around.” You and your partner walk the aisles and sheepishly pick up a package of diapers like teens furtively grabbing condoms. You’re 37 not 16.

...

The snow fell in big floaty flakes near the porch light in the February night. You hold the railing tight as another contraction bears down and pushes your mind to a very quiet place. You think of cats hunkering down under the porch to greet kittens safely. The door is locked, and the blanketing snow collects on the swirls of the old lamb coat.

“I’m sorry.” The midwife apologizes as she grabs her keys. “My car kept overheating.” The husband wants to diagnose the car problem. The midwife

you hadn't ever met before flicks on the lights, and you haul yourself purposefully up the stairs to the smallest room facing the pines outside. You crack the window to let the fresh snowy air inside.

As the husband fishes for CDs, you try the tub. The warm water eases the pain deep inside your back, but the porcelain sides turn cold, and you can't get a hold of anything. The midwife helps you migrate to the bed, and in the quiet of the new morning you push through the burning pain, first the head and then the shoulders, and the rest slips out glistening. Out with eyes wide open and skin mottled purple like a squid- you see your baby. Healthy. It's a boy.

Your sense of accomplishment and power is unmatched. The relief from exertion couples with an adrenaline surge. A room with just you, a spouse, and the midwife- now has a new being. She hands him quickly to your chest and the umbilical cords pulls taut against your clit; a surprising new pain. You hold him tight laughing, uncomfortable, yet excited thinking all will be easy from now on, yet afterbirth, checking for nicks, breastfeeding, all hurt too. You feel as though you were in a car wreck, relieved to be unscathed but jolted and jarred. There are the before times and now. It's immigration not tourism. Forever changed, you have a squirrely little being, helpless and alien, under your care.

The husband gets antifreeze for the midwife, "What a lovely man." He brings you a peanut butter sandwich from home. Six hours post-partum, you drive the two blocks home through the deep spring snow to your tiny studio overlooking the city to begin your new life. They suck the daylight out of you.

...

Shiva cut off Ganesh's head because he was jealous of the attention the boy's mother Pararti paid to their son. When Parvarti discovers the misdeed, Shiva hastily attaches an elephant's head to the boy. The painter husband, too, found he was no longer paramount once baby came, and he flew into fits of foolish rage. The fastidious care for his archival paper, his brushes, and his pallets doesn't translate into tiny snaps, Velcro, and socks. "My fingers are too big.... the stroller is too short.... the sling hurts my back."

One day visiting NY carrying baby in the park, you look at the upper eastside blondes on their phones flanked by their uniformed nannies pushing prams. You hate them, and you wish you were them. What freedom money must bring. You tutor English to a host of foreign scholars and their families, but once you calculate for travel and class, your fee barely covers the babysitter. Husband asserts the superiority of his MFA. The collective goes to supporting his career as an investment in the future. From power to reliance, creativity to exhaustion, birth proves both a catalyst and damper on your life.

...

Toddler boy was weaned and soon after baby two came in the same blue room at the top of the stairs. Like a skiff on a tide, in and out, in and out, she- it's a she!- came. Her hand held in front of her face, she emerged with a tsunami woosh of liquids and fierceness. The umbilical cord wrapped round and round her neck like the Burmese girls with coils wound tight. The Grenadian midwife sang, "Why you givin' her a name like that? Use the middle one- that's nicer." "You know, a long cord means she'll be smart-even with that name." As you hold her, you ache for your boy. The neighbor brings him through the early morning snow to meet the infant who gifts him a match-box tractor, so he can clear all the burdens in life out of her way. He is a handful; she is an armful. You are again caged in the consuming enormity of a new life-one you created.

"Help me find the gallery in Brookline so I can pick up my paintings."

"I can't help you; I just gave birth."

"I can only get the van this week, and you know how to get there."

"You have lived in Boston four years; you should know how to get there by now."

"You're not supportive of my career because you don't have one."

Three babies.

...

You all live in the fourth-floor studio you once lived in alone. The rounds of tenure-track applications, the hope that keeps you in the tiny apartment, come and go. You become friends with the women in "the office", the park around the block- Gosia and Aga the Polish nannies overstaying their visas, Katia the Moldovan poet who smokes to provoke, matcha sipping

Argentines, the German woman with her perfect sheepskin lined carriage and MIT husband, and Catherine the French mother of twins and their brother just 15 months older. Husband has his art studio. Husband goes for coffee unencumbered. Husband reads *The New Yorker*. Husband says you and the kids are what are keeping him from a NY art career. Husband says you don't understand because you haven't studied.

Your world shrinks and fatigue expands as you wonder how you went from teaching English to French lawyers in Tokyo to asking for a chance to go for a walk alone. Your view of Boston, your interests, all are taken over by an occupying force eroding your resources and cheer. It is easy to give to children, but the "partner" who extracts rather than helps is hard. Rubens copies, Schongauer copies, van Eyck copies- all the fucking copies keep the husband busy and "just about" to create a new body of work. He reaches for your body as you nurse the little one and caress the toddler- twisting yourself literally to fulfill everyone's needs- you nearly disappear.

...

With no tenure in sight and baby number two now a toddler, you make a move. Jump start. Reset. Space, a yard, a bedroom door that closes, an ugly house with bones. You set up systems, so husband isn't overwhelmed. You find work at the local college, even the kids model for an ad. You think now will be different. Packing the truck to leave your dear apartment in your fine city, you find out husband has quit his adjunct job because he's "tired of the conservatism of the college students' artwork. I really should be at an art school." He's sure he told you he had quit.

Incredulous.

...

You renovate, lactate, persevere. He paints, prances, and preens. "If only I had a big studio like before."

You find- remarkably, impossibly, you are pregnant again.

"I need you to go and terminate; you go there and take care of this."

"Really? Maybe some discussion is appropriate."

"No, I've decided."

You are mad and contrarian and resolute. What has he contributed? What makes this the only option? You have already given up so much, maybe he will give up something to help you. Maybe he will realize how lovely his children are. Maybe he will see how family is more interesting than work. Maybe you don't really care anymore what he thinks. But this isn't a puppy or the choice of car color. Perhaps you are unfair. But then again, this is your only avenue of creativity left. The small creatures who live with you are so utterly lovely. They are funny, and creative, and mesmerizing. Your narcissism is filled every day when you lie on the floor looking at them as you play "sick wolf" or "hide the pandas." You roll trucks with lights on top and watch Wallace and Gromet over and over. They make you laugh. Husband rarely laughs. He stresses when they spill milk. He doesn't want a swing set ruining the yard. He adds marks to their drawings.

...

You visit Planned Parenthood alone to consider what to do. You decide alone. This new creature dwelling within, whomever it might be, is your choice.

...

Months later in the 4am lavender stillness, you walk past the tent erected for the Greek festival. The day at the beach and lifting the picnic table must have started things moving. You know birth by now and are comfortable with what is and is not in your control. The angst of the snowy night years before is missing as you climb the Spring Street steps to a new experience. The midwife greets you at the door, tea lights surround a wooden tub, and a mirror is set under the water, so she can watch your progress without bothering you. Here, you enter knowing the pain is fleeting and the birth is brief compared to what will follow. Into the water you clamber, and two hours later a small, infant boy swims up to the surface of the tub. He's a little fish on your warm wet chest. As he floats in the water you remember your missing voice and lost desires.

...

The beautiful teen babysitter with golden curls and bellbottoms laced up the sides comes to the house with presents for the big kids and to meet the

new baby. She brings a plush horse and a little wooden rat and presents the day-old infant a tiny golden figure of Ganesh, the god of auspiciousness and the dispeller of problems and obstacles. She knew somehow.

...

The kids are in college now finding their ways and thinking big thoughts. Mr Stubbs and Grandpa have died. The husband got tenure and left two months later with another artist. You've endured boredom, way too much excitement, exhaustion, exertion, and heartbreak. Your voice was silenced, but now it's back. Good job, mum.

Three Essays about Two Abortions

Catherine Memory

ESSAYS

Meeting with a Genetics Counselor

It was a warm, sunny afternoon in June, 2007. We were another bright, young couple sitting in the small, windowless, genetic counseling office, within a well-respected, high-rise medical building. The office didn't really belong to the genetics counselor, it was just used for consultations. So, it felt empty although it contained three simple, sturdy, standard-issue waiting room type chairs, a long, flat fluorescent overhead light, anonymous, supposedly-soothing, faded artwork on the walls, a sterile, stream-lined desk clear of papers, and an office telephone. The air was dry and air conditioned.

It was silent. There were no sounds in the halls. Was it after 5 o'clock? Had almost everyone left for the day already? *I can't remember.* HVAC white noise hummed in the background. *Or was that my memory of the dim ultrasound hum haunting me?*

The genetics counselor seated across from us was visibly pregnant herself. Oh Universe, how was that even possible? Her own baby bump was perhaps just a few weeks past my 20.

She was very sorry. She spoke in an evenly cadenced, low, deadpan voice.

"Most likely a genetic mutation. A fluke. A lightening strike," she said.

She described our medical options for the next couple of weeks, if we were considering abortion, which we were.

We could wait for the results of genetic testing to confirm what we already knew intimately from the grainy grey ultrasound screening of our daughter. Her ultrasound images included multiple broken long bones and possibly broken ribs. But if we waited to make our medical decision only after receiving the test results, that could put us past the New York legal time limit of 24 weeks. If we waited for the more-official-feeling scientific certainty of genetic test results to confirm a potentially lethal-to-our-child

diagnosis, we could be too late to get an abortion in New York City.

If we waited for test results past New York's limit, we had the option of getting on a plane to Kansas. There was one doctor there who could help you after 24 weeks, a Dr. Tiller.

On Sunday, May 31, 2009, Dr. George Tiller was serving as an usher at his Lutheran church when he was assassinated at age 67 by an anti-abortion extremist who shot him in the head at point-blank range.

"Can you please pass me the tissues?," I said.

She tried to soothe, "oh, don't cry," she said.

"No," I told her. I shouted "no!" "I will cry," I said, firmly.

Was this the counselor who told me I could try again? I can't remember.

My young husband, a doctor in training himself, wearing ruffled, blue scrubs, gently took my hand. His face was stony, ashen, silent, his eyes were wide with horror and yearning, but his hand in mine was warm and soft.

A First Snowstorm

December 14, 2007. It was the night before my second second-trimester abortion.

I stood in my empty nursery, and I cradled my convex belly with my hands. As I rocked side to side a bit, I noticed a quiet creak in the wide, yellow, wooden floorboards as I moved, alone in the darkness. We hadn't even plugged in a light. We weren't ready to decorate. The room was clean, airy, and beautiful, yet completely empty.

Standing there, rocking, in the middle of the small room, I looked out two lovely small windows. That night my vista was lined with a colorful array of blinking Christmas lights decorating the neighbors' houses and shrubbery, all the way down our street.

"You would have loved this view," I said.

I wasn't really alone. I was holding my unborn son. I sang to him, softly, my voice cracking, throat aching, tears rolling down my cheeks. I sang the song from White Christmas about falling asleep counting your blessings instead of sheep. I couldn't quite bring myself to sing a traditional lullaby, but this one felt right.

I had been cautiously optimistic. I had followed sound medical advice. I had tried again, and succeeded, to get pregnant just a few months after my abortion in June. But we had a 5% chance of recurrence of the rare genetic mutation for which we had terminated pregnancy. And now this subsequent baby also was indeed affected by the same genetic disease. And this was confirmed via CVS, which is an extra-early amniocentesis, for which we now qualified.

The next morning was muffled, quiet, blurry. The weather forecast was for an afternoon blizzard, so the roads that morning were eerily clear. We were all alone in the world as we sped down the highway to the hospital, my husband and I.

I remember so little of the actual procedure.

A nurse wrapped a plastic ID bracelet around my wrist, which I'd later save. The anesthesiologist had kind eyes above his surgical mask. My high risk OBGYN, who performed the abortion, gave me her personal cell phone number in case of emergency, afterwards.

Because our procedure was the first of the day, my husband and I made it home safely, just as the first icy flakes started falling. Life as we knew it, once again, stopped. A heavy blanket of snow surrounded our house and comforted me in my grief.

Medical Records

Sixteen years later, it's 2023, and I'm climbing the stairs to my second-floor bedroom and my walk-in closet there. As I trudge round the landing to our second floor, I pass by a long line of framed family photos decorating the hallway. My two cherubic, healthy, living, smiling daughters are the stars of the wall, and my husband and I smile proudly alongside them.

Just on the other side of this family gallery, is the back wall of my walk-in

closet. The top shelf of that closet holds two, cardboard photo boxes, one pink and one blue, pushed to the farthest- away corner of the shelf.

The two, pastel-hued memory boxes each contain a few thin, filmy, ultrasound photos. The photos are nestled carefully inside each box, surrounded by sympathy cards, ribbons from baby gifts, and printed out e-mails sent in 2007 by family and friends. Many of the cards and e-mails quote scripture.

I wonder, would I have received so many cards, so much support, if we had told everyone the truth, back then, that we chose abortion? What if we had told the truth that we made a very grave decision together to end the pregnancies we lost?

Up another flight of stairs, in a dusty crawl space, are my medical records from 2007. Locked behind the crawl space door are two fat accordion files, impeccably labeled and organized, containing faxes, insurance bills, and pages upon pages of my handwritten notes on college ruled notebook paper. So much writing and reading, so much material evidence of short, prenatal lives lived, to make sense of the genetic diagnosis, process the grief, make sense of a plan forward, and find the team of medical experts from more than three states who ultimately would make possible our future healthy pregnancies. These dull brown folders are stored away within earshot of my children's vibrant attic playroom, silent yet just adjacent to the joyful noise of play.

A floor below, on my closet shelf, my first babies' ultrasound photos are lovingly protected from fading within the darkness of their boxes, yet they are also hidden, out of sight, and, all these years later, often out of mind.

But we'll never forget.

In Person

Fiona Maurisette

ESSAY

I like being a disembodied head on your computer screen. I'm glistening. Not from sweat, just the anticipation of wowing the crowd for a little over an hour. One hour and 15 minutes of my expressive face telling you that we will get through this. We will survive this, just like they did. And they had it worse. Or they had it without memes and Netflix and four new fake laws that pretend to protect us from them. Back to the screen. As I said, you like me on your computer screen. My excitement translates well. I can move my hands without you getting worried. I do this winking thing that makes you think that you are in on a secret. And you can keep your camera off and still get the same effect. Clean your room. Watch another episode. Dance to the rhythm of my voice reciting the Lorde's prayer. Audre Lorde.

Or sit with your camera on. Face to face with my passion for all things Black feminists and future. Face to face with someone who is trying to make sure we all survive. Face to face with someone who recognizes that they had it worse, but this doesn't make it better. Face to face with me trying to forget that this body exists. Because when this body comes into the room...

In person, you think that I'm tall and huge. You're a little afraid of where all this energy will go. You're surprised someone so heavy can move so much. The glistening may be from carrying all the weight of my body around. And all you can pay attention to is the body now. The mask covers half of my face, and you don't want to stare at my eyes. So, you follow my body as I gesture and move through the Lorde's prayer. But Lorde sounds different now.

It reads differently in person. This body doesn't tell her birth story the way other people expect. The way I expected. And when I tell her age, well, the only thing that bounces back is their eyes from my body. And you knew I was Black, but I am somehow Blacker in person. I mean there is more Black body for you to see. Trust me, I want on your screen, too.

Infection

Carroll Beauvais

MEMOIR EXCERPT

I wake up wet with the cold sweat that finds me nightly. My thighs so slick there is no friction, like I'm slicked in baby oil. I feel for my incision. It's wet, too; too wet. Managing to my elbows, I reach for the lamp switch and see the scar weeping and sticky. This two days after my incision check, the second worst day of my life. I nudge N. awake, I call the after-hours number for the practice, and we go back to sleep. I don't know why we even bother calling that number anymore. I imagine the on-call doctor's dread when they see the page is from me. This will make the third call with no response in a week. I am that patient. I wonder what it's like to take an oath to do no harm and break it. I realize I know.

I fall back into sleep. When I wake, it is morning, and the fever is back. The weep is now a seep, thick and angry and red, like a mouth that can't hold back any longer and wants to scream. I need a doctor. But I don't have one. Dr. M. forced me to see Dr. L. for my incision check (even though I had not seen or heard from her since two days before the delivery) because we "both [had] some things we should talk to each other about." Dr. L, who never called or visited me after my child had died under her care, stormed and stomped in and out of the exam room, shouting. Her nurse's eyes bored into the floor. I had asked her how this happened and said I had requested my records to try to understand. She said it was my fault that she won't honor anyone's birth plan ever again. She screamed some more and stomped again and huffed in and out of the exam room, and then she dropped me as a patient.

I'm at the mercy of my insurance company which won't let me finish my postpartum care for the pregnancy with a different provider since the negotiated fee and copay amounted to almost \$2000 for the total package, including postnatal, and I must stay within the same practice at the same hospital. Nine months, \$2000, and all I got was a dead baby. At least I'm still humorless. There is no one to call except Dr. M. who is apparently running the Bywater Clinic today, according to the receptionist who answered when N. called the office.

N. calls the Bywater Clinic while I shower the familiar stick and stench of

hormone sweats off me. Carefully, I move to the shower. If I stand erect, it seems that my wound might bare her ugly festering and scream out my insides. Carefully, I bring one foot and then the other into the shower. The water feels good at first, though moving my arms about my shoulders is hard to do without pain. It's when I shampoo my hair that the edges of my vision darken and soften. I know that I should call out, but while I search for language to make the sounds, the darkness is swallowed by the center light. All trauma is preverbal.

...

I hear again before the other senses arrive. My mind is slow to make sense of the sounds. I hear N.'s voice, my name, fear. Then I am being shaken, and I realize it is N. who is shaking me, hard. Something must be wrong. I must be in trouble. But I don't want to leave this beautiful nowhere without memory or thoughts. My body betrays me again, opening its eyes. I am on the bottom of the bathtub. I must have fainted in the shower.

...

With N's help, I walk into the clinic. There are lots of people and no one speaks softly. In the back, they take my vitals in a joint room. Dr. M. is surprised to see me. She needs me to know Dr. L. prescribed the exact same antibiotics she would have, as if anything either of them say or think is worth a shit to me. When N. tells her I passed out, she says we should have gone directly to the hospital; I could be septic.

But my god, I am terrified to go back to that place. I am certain they would make sure to kill me this time. I don't say this, but perhaps my eyes convey my terror. Perhaps Dr. M has some small mercy left inside of her. Maybe she thinks I've been through enough suffering for two weeks. She says she can try to get the infection out.

The scar is now so swollen, that it is open—the sides don't meet and where they should meet, there is thick pus. She tells me I need to look at Dad. The word slaps me across the face. She calls him Dad out of habit or because she doesn't know his name and not because she wants to recognize us as parents.

I remember a Q-tip as long as a sword and then like a dagger in my abdomen.

And the way she placed her hands there and then leaned into them with the entirety of her small frame. I heard myself scream out in blinding pain—pain not so different from the post birth pain of the nurses pushing down my uterus to (apparently?) help the swelling, telling the uterus to contract back to its smaller shape. Even my uterus cannot believe how the person who was once there is now nowhere. Even my body cannot accept that there is nothing where there was something.

I remember N. keeping a still face, knowing I was watching him for any clues about whatever was happening that I couldn't see.

Later, he told me the pus was plentiful and became a rainbow of putrid colors mixed with blood. And now when I remember, I see the puddle of swirls—not unlike the rainbow of motor oil that collects on the water's surface.

Memory is weird like this and should not be trusted. No matter how clearly you remember the shimmering.

Blues My Naughty Sweetie Gave to Me

Cleo Frances Kidd

POEM

Blood moving forwards, body working back.
A change in time
and family tree.

Sick for months,
too busy scaffolding seclusion,

a home for a notion that after all of it:

the moaning & cattle prod fire, pleading & breath,
is so wholly mine—

this ghost.

The Birth Plan

Renuka Sundaram

ESSAY

“NCB.” My delivery nurse told the nurse starting her shift.

“Oh!” The new one’s voice arched.

My dear child — Your Papa will say later that they were gushing over how I had labored without an epidural. “Almost felt like hypno-birthing,” the one coming off her shift surmised. I didn’t care. I was riveted by you in Papa’s arms. He held you delicately as if you were cotton candy in a swaddle.

We were wheeled into the recovery room. Another handover. Another declaration of NCB. Another exclamation that I took to be appreciation.

NCB, or natural child birth, means birthing without the use of medication to manage pain or induce labor. It was not part of the ‘birth plan.’ Well, sort of. Nothing was written down. I had agreed with your Papa and our doula, T, that I would see how labor goes without an epidural. If the pain got to be much I would ask for pain medication — a position that stemmed from ‘let’s see if we don’t absolutely need an injection to the spine,’ rather than, ‘I feel strongly about birthing without medicines.’

You know that I was mostly raised by your great-grandmother, Ayah, in India. She would suck on a pebble before she took a pill. Pills? Poison pellets! But you can’t blame her — she lost two of her children, aged just a few days old and about 10 years old, to the neglect or mistake of the medical establishment. Her principal ambition in life was to never set foot in a doctor’s office. Period cramps? Hot water bottle. Headache? Warm water with lemon juice. Upset stomach? A potion with jaggery, or unrefined sugar, and dry ginger. It’s not that she denied me medical care when I absolutely needed it. I got my vaccines and tetanus shots the same as my friends. It’s just that her bar for what deserved medical attention was set beyond her skills and flair for home remedies. I grew up thinking of medicines as a last resort.

Yes, the pain got to be much. How do I describe a contraction? Imagine you are trying to squeeze the pit of a whole ripe avocado through a tiny slit

at its curved base. You have to work the flesh repeatedly, taking care not to squeeze out the flesh itself, only the pit, taking care not to make the slit too large and lose the integrity of the fruit. I was that avocado.

The first few hours of labor were a revelation. Each wave of pain came as a shock. *Could it be this bad? Will I get used to it?* Papa and T tag-teamed with caring for me. A gentle massage, a sip of water. No matter. I continued to get agitated. I tried to think, no small task when your body is contorting on the inside. What were the positions we practiced in childbirth class? On my knees, yes. “Help me get on my knees!...No, no, still bad...Should I sit on a ball?...Ball!”

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I sobbed, repeating my lament. “I don’t know...I don’t know...”

“You don’t have to know,” T said gently, nudging me to trust in something beyond me.

At 17, I left home and moved to the US for college. When I saw friends popping Tylenol and ibuprofen for silly things like hangovers, I thought they were bordering on abusing pills. Over the years, my stance softened. I started keeping medicines at home and carrying a steroid inhaler for the childhood asthma that had resurged. I still forgot to take or use them right away. I typically white-knuckled my way through the early stages of an illness or injury, as if I had to earn the pain pill or the steroid that would help me breathe. The pain and discomfort had to reach a critical threshold for those options to bubble up to my consciousness.

Still early in labor, the nurse offered me nitrous oxide. Yes, laughing gas, but in highly diluted form. It wasn’t a pain inhibitor like an epidural. It was described to me as something that would ‘take the edge off.’ I squished the mask to my face and sucked deeply. Was this a joke? It took the edge off like soothing music might take the edge off of an earache. Still, I clung to the mask for dear life; it gave me something to do. It didn’t occur to me to ask for an epidural.

About a year after your birth, I shared how I had managed labor pain with a friend who had become pregnant with her first child.

“How did you make the choice to not take epidural?” she asked.

“I thought labor would progress faster without it,” I said, which was true,

“but I wasn’t opposed to getting it,” which was also true.

When she had birthed her own son, she told me how she had labored without epidural initially, the nitrous oxide did nothing for her (tell me about it!), and after suffering through the pain for several hours she asked herself what she was trying to prove and got the epidural. It made me ask myself, “Had I been trying to prove something?”

Time arced to an endless loop, as if I were living the same few seconds of intense pain followed by brief relief. The loop was closing in, the relief part getting shorter — 3 minutes, then 2, 90 seconds, 60 seconds, the length of a few desperate dry breaths. Space contracted similarly. The world beyond my skin dissolved into a yellowish haze. Sometimes, I made out Papa’s hand, sometimes T’s touch. The pain grew in stature, demanded submission. By then, I was no longer capable of executing logic statements: IF ‘inconceivable, seemingly intolerable pain,’ THEN ‘epidural.’ Simple enough, but I couldn’t process it.

Mind over matter, I had learned early. The body was something to be commanded. It’s desires and needs were nulled to uphold ideas and ideologies. I saw my mother, Amma, ‘embody’ this, sometimes in tragic ways.

I must have been 12 or 13. I was standing outside my parents’ bedroom late one night, ear to the locked door, trying to catch sounds from beyond. A dull smack. Flesh connecting with flesh. I waited to hear Amma, perhaps a yelp, a cry. Not a whimper. Adrenaline coursed through me but I had learned to stay still. “Don’t do anything to anger him,” she had warned me repeatedly. “Only I will suffer,” she pleaded. She was convinced the only way to deal with my father’s violent outbursts was to play possum. Calling for help would surely escalate the situation. I listened until there were no more sounds.

Once, I did escalate. I called my grandparents who took my mother to the hospital. No one informed the authorities. Even more inexplicable, my grandparents escorted her, bandaged and tintured, back to our home, back to my father. I remember Ayah sitting on a wooden saddle stool in the corner of my parents’ bedroom, Amma lying on one side, my father sitting sentry next to her. Ayah pleaded with the man who had broken all that they entrusted to him.

“If you are angry you can shout at her, scold her, but please don’t raise your hand against her.” The strongest rebuke I ever heard in defense of my mother’s body.

Amma was silent, staring at the ceiling. How did she reason being back on her marital bed? What diktats, heard from the collective and subsequently internalized, had taken precedence over the safety of her body?

You can’t support yourself and your daughters without a man.

How can you hold your head high as a divorced woman?

He will never let me go.

We are a respectable family.

Perhaps all of the above. But, there is a more treacherous idea that nags me — Endurance is strength. Did Amma, and Ayah before her, believe this?

Six hours since active labor began? Nine hours? The only way to keep time was through the dilation of my cervix — three centimeters, four centimeters, five...Good progress. Need more. Keep it up!

Periods of lucidity were intermittent and short...T using a soft scarf taut against my belly to massage it...sitting slumped over the back of a chair under a warm shower, I was a wet sponge, self-wringing...on my knees on the bed, hanging on to the raised back, unselfconscious about the sweat and slobber, language reverting to a primal moan...the duh-duh of your heartbeat amplified through the monitors.

Later, Papa will say he didn’t think he should make a decision for me about the epidural, even though it was so difficult to watch me suffer. He trusted me to ask. He knew me as independent and competent.

The threats to my own body began when I was too young to fight or flee, so I froze. Maybe four years old, five, six...In a joint family home, I would freeze under the sheets of a communal bed with uncle, aunt, and cousins — an older boy and an older girl. Rough man hands pulled up my frock, breached my underwear. The roughness made me scrunch my eyes. The stealth made me forget to breathe. Then there was nothing. I was a baby possum.

Again, at age thirteen, fourteen, fifteen...weekend visits to the same home.

A call to go to bed where a shadow figure would emerge — the older boy, now young man, like an incessant mosquito; his hands like the sucking proboscis, unconcerned with boundaries. ‘I’m not sleepy,’ I would fake, sitting on the balcony all night, drawing comfort from the cold concrete walls.

At fifteen, I found my voice and complained to my parents about the uncle, so long ago, and the cousin, now.

“Did she misunderstand their actions?” my father questioned, echoing his sister, the aunt.

“Think of it as a bad nightmare and forget about it,” my mother counseled, echoing her own counsel to herself.

Mind over matter, they insisted.

Finally, I was dilated enough. I lay on my back on the bed, Papa propping up one leg, T the other. Long forgotten was my wish to deliver on my hands and knees — a better position for the body to facilitate the passage of the baby. At this point, I would have flopped down like a cartoon dog on slime. Long forgotten was the option to take an epidural — which may have allowed me to conserve my energy for pushing you out when the time came.

I tried to push, with all the force of a toddler pushing against a heavy metal door. That’s when you started to become distressed. Your heartbeat kept dropping.

“Turn to your side!” The nurse would command me.

“Can I just wait for this [contraction] to pass?” I once pleaded.

“No! Now!”

Those handling various body parts would help to turn me. Your heartbeat would pick up.

When I think about Ayah and Amma and their relationship with pain, both physical and emotional, I am conflicted. They were dealt cold hard options

that callused hands and hearts. They endured what they had to. And I want to celebrate that!

But, I also wonder if they clung too hard to an identity built on overcoming.

Ayah was unlettered and anointed to labor. She gave and gave of her flesh, through punishing household chores from a young age, birthing four children and raising three, caring for grandchildren and her husband well into his 80s and her 70s. More was taken from her — a baby and a child. And some, she denied herself — like the pleasure of crunching down on a whole *pappadam* crisp, instead corralling the crumbs on the plate, even when we had plenty.

Still, her pride at the things she accomplished and endured in life — one indistinguishable from the other — was fierce.

“Everything we have and gave to our children [and grandchildren] was borne of my labor,” she would declare. It wasn’t hyperbole.

And yet, she also rationalized her suffering: “I’ve atoned well in this life for the sins of the past.” A nebulous logic, a generalized belief, one that was available when we grasped an explanation for our troubles. As a tween/teen who was squarely concerned with my one present life, I was unsatisfied.

Amma had a leg up — a graduate degree in her purse, earning more than my father when they married. She would cross professional thresholds and physical shores that her mother never did. But it didn’t stop her from sliding unwittingly, or being dragged forcefully, to that shadow space cast by her husband, my father. In the society we lived, women didn’t have full personhood, and instead derived dignity and care by attaching themselves to fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. When I think of this world, I sometimes get her ‘choice’ to stay in that joyless space.

But, she also saw it as a righteous space. “The people who have done me wrong will eventually suffer,” she would declare.

Again, unsatisfactory. I did not care that those who hurt her would suffer in some distant future or future life. Besides she said nothing about her own suffering nor mine, about which I did care. Her suffering seemed to stand in for any call to action she may have heard, from any residual sense of

agency she may have had. Her silence seemed to have the last word.

Ayah and Amma bequeathed their worldview to me, along with some wisdom to survive it.

“You need physical reserves [read: fat and muscle] to fulfill your responsibilities,” Ayah would forewarn, preparing me for a future of grueling physical labor. The electric blender and washing machine were anomalous blips in the lifescapes that she knew.

“We have to learn to carry on,” Amma once counseled me on an unhappy relationship that I was in (which I eventually ended.) To her, relationships were rough terrain without safe exits. Where would she stack a desire to be seen and valued amongst a need for physical safety and protection from emotional wounding?

Skeptical as I may have been of their pronouncements and counsel, these are the stories I carried with me.

But also know, my child, that their wish for me to have a good life was never in doubt.

“Leave this home and be well!” they offered as benediction. They supported my leaving for the US, swallowing the loss of a quotidian relationship with me. This too, I carry.

I had been pushing for over an hour. Your heartbeat was becoming erratic. The doctor summoned the emergency team who waited outside the door of the birthing room like marauders at the city gates, vacuum in hand.

She then spoke slowly. “I’m going to let you try one more time.”

That is when I believe you took matters into your own hands. One last time, I did what I had been doing ineffectively, and yet, you popped your head out of me, tearing the perineum. The doctor pulled you out and placed you on my chest, still attached to me by the umbilical cord. You came into focus — your scrunchy face and long fingernails. Your cries cleared the fog of labor.

And *that* is the story of my NCB.

Inglorious.

Lucky.

I wanted to tell you this because you'll hear stories of others' experiences with birthing, with pain and suffering in general, and how they dealt with it.

Know that a) you will never know the full story, and b) you are under no obligation to do what they did. And while I'm at it, a few other pointers for your 'birth plan':

1) Your worth is not based on what you can extract from your body, or what your body can endure.

2) You will go into childbirth with ideas derived from childbirth classes, friends' experiences, and books you've read. But mostly, you will go into it with all the ideas you have inscribed in your bones from a lifetime. Know that these ideas will eventually submit to the body. They have to. It's the body's crowning experience.

3) Whatever its perceived shortcomings or failures, make your peace, or at least enter a truce with your body for this experience. Listen to it. You will anyway soon see how remarkable it actually is.

4) Pain doesn't have to be borne gracefully, Audrey Hepburn style. You are allowed to scream, be delirious, be unreasonable. You are also allowed to seek relief.

5) Enduring pain is not a badge of honor. It may be a necessity. There is no glory. There is no shame. In the end, if you're lucky, you'll have a raspy voice, a bloody reproductive tract, and a crying little baby, and that last part is glorious.

6) If anyone offers to put you on a pedestal for enduring pain, just say, "No, thank you." I recommend writing these down.

In Five Month's Time (Passive Tense)

Mylena Rodriguez

ESSAY + POEM

I am not pregnant today. There is a sense of rediscovery when that statement is otherwise. That some bodies make babies, and barely feeling like a somebody yourself, you don't know yours can be a maker too. Until the cluster of cells reads positive. I am 23 and I am pregnant for the first time. I have to make this statement once more to put myself in that place. To be able to say I was very early along being at six weeks, to be able to say I was pregnant and I did not want to be pregnant, to be able to say before becoming pregnant I was almost certain I never wanted to live a remaining life of motherhood. To become full time, to become an everything, to become mother. After holding the positive results in my hands, I don't remember how long it took to be seen, to just get someone to confirm a pregnancy before being able to decide what to do about it; but it was only a few days. A few days that felt too much like a whole week. The clinic seeing me didn't take my insurance, or at least all of it. I know abortion storytellers encourage talking about the financial barriers but now, I just think it's funny that my mom and I went to the public library down the street from the clinic to register for an additional insurance neither of us or even my siblings were going to need again. Working around the system-mom things.

Leaving the clinic for a few hours gave me time and breathing room to choose what kind of procedure I wanted to go with. I'm met again with the thought of nourishing more than myself when my mom and I sit down for brunch, and before that met with a small gruesome sticker indicating *a prolifer* was here plastered on a pole in front of my mom's parked car. This isn't about a cliché moment of pressure and reconsideration, just *what are the fucking odds!?* I'm going with the medical abortion option, I'm going plan C, I just want to lay down again ASAP and without my legs spread open in front of strangers. I want the abortion pills now. What that looks like is this: I first take a pill called mifepristone which is going to stop the pregnancy hormone from growing any further. I didn't look at the screen that displays my vaginal ultrasound and I was thankful the nurse didn't ask either if I'd like to see, which I was halfway anticipating would happen because I watch too many tv series. Keeping my eyes again on the sterile blandness of this place, I don't look at any four of the nurses who watch me rather intensely

as I take this pill number one into my mouth. I watch my slip-on checkered vans I've had for years but still considerably in good condition, the tile that is in much worse condition, and really anything without a directness while silence manages its way into filling the small room. I take the dixie cup of water handed to me and I swallow.

I don't have any Virgo placements in my chart but if you give me directions such as *ok so hey, the rest of the medication is to be taken 24-48 hours later but 30 minutes before that, take this preventative nausea medication;* then best believe I will be following directions in the 24 hour window and planning to the T. Ok, I don't know if that's truly how Virgos work but I will make sure my phone will be charged for the one timer I set, that my heating pad is on deck, and that my diaper of a pad is on, and I will not be staying in a home that I feel as though I can't peacefully interrupt a pregnancy in.

That home held souls for wonder, roots for new beginnings
two abortions, several births, and caved conversations
It is a homecoming for self
two sisters, one by blood to have stories of experiences that won't leave
the body
even when it has been marked a goner

For that reason, I go to my nana's home (pronounced mama but with an *n*) where I used to live (and only bad bitches have lived with their grandmas at some point), after picking me up and getting to her house, it's about time; I have to finish what I started. The next pills are called misoprostol, there are four of them to be set buccally, two on each side and timed for another 30-minute countdown. You see, I'm killing this shit... no pun intended (sorry, had to). I swallow with water whatever is left and sogging in my mouth and this is followed by: I'm taking oxy and I'm burning myself with my heating pad until I pass out from the pain and truly, I don't remember thinking much about the guy who tangoed with me to this place, I just want to get back to my twenty-something childless life. Sitting on the toilet after sleeping through my cervix softening and my uterus contracting to expel it all, I sit on the toilet and stare at that same pillow of a thing on my panties that are hugging my knees, there is a bloody shape that I tell myself is already in fetal position, that one day would have become a bigger version with a face. I stare until I feel pins and needles. A few days later my aunt tells me that my breasts won't feel as sore as the first time, which they still are and this makes me hold them. The way this support system of wombs

related to my own hold me now.

I thought I was careful really doesn't feel like anything. What I mean by this is, that statement doesn't sound like enough from me when I don't want to say anything more than that, and this isn't about shame because I know that would turn into a kind that isn't just my own, that there are just as many pregnancy scares as there are not- pregnant-surprise-parties and shame is such a wasteful experience inside of a body. It's about finding myself five months later with two more plus signs on the sticks I've peed on because by now it's clear I like a confirmation moment, right? It's about, maybe we need more slut life anthologies in the world, and it's about the curiosity that even now may be carried with me that if I ever had the option to decide not to go to that abortion appointment that I was ok to wait for this time around. I mean, not to make it about astrology again because I try not to be that person (says me who wrote a poem significantly about my moon sign the other day) but I kept finding myself back on those due date calculations sites, daydreaming about giving birth to a baby sometime in the months of October or November.

It's January of 2020, I know, *that year*, it really said- *ok so boom*. It's starting to snow lightly in downtown Seattle and I'm on my way to my second job (do you see in which the ways I'm not in a place to give into my ovaries). I have an abortion scheduled for tomorrow which I tried to get last week, but I was told three weeks along is too early for any termination procedure. Earlier than this, I was in a barre class looking for a visible pregnant person to watch out of the corner of my eye as we both raised our heels in a squatting position, because that's how it worked the first time a day or two finding out about my pregnancy. I wanted another sign or familiarity. Like I said, I'm ok waiting but oh the irony, if only someone could've told me where this pregnancy was growing. I am 23 and I am pregnant, for the second time. Again, this is not something that I want, but for the first time, I am pregnant and I am able to visualize what my child may be like, I let myself go there. I use his brown eyes, and I use his laugh, and I use his last name. I don't want to find a way to say without saying anymore that it is exactly what it sounds like, it's the desperation that translated. That even now I wish it was about the baby like people say, because maybe it would have been easier than just wanting the guy who did a similar tango with me this time. But it was, it was about me meeting myself possibly in love and wanting to keep it, intoxicated in it, it seeping out of my pores. I wish it was about the baby and solely the baby and not a mini us, I wish that

instead, I was able to write a *to you* in reference to miscarrying a baby.

When the pain started it was similar to when you're unsure if water is hot or cold at first to the touch, it was a sudden pain that in a moment was unrecognizable, then unmanageable, and then unignorable. Being at my second job, I was at a counter with a guest who I left abruptly to run to the office's restroom. I've thought about that stranger from time to time, how they probably thought my customer service skills were just out of whack. I lay on the restroom floor, the cold tile serving as an anchor for my body for only a second until I feel like I'm evaporating from abdominal pain. An anchor like two bodies and four hands intertwined in a bed laced with fingertips to, I must say, get me here again. I don't know which way to face the toilet, I don't know what is to fall out of my body and out of which end but that's the only thing I can think of needing to happen. My mom leaves her job early which is also downtown Seattle to come and pick me up, I throw a wave as quickly as possible to my coworker who took over at the counter that I am GONE, don't look at me hunching over, this is me hauling ass. At this point, I am so bloated that my grey wash denim jeans no longer zip, I can no longer stand straight, and I feel just as pale as I look for the majority of a calendar year in Washington. Little did I know, this was me fighting for my life, now sprawled out in the backseat of my mom's minivan, can you imagine it? the drama, (cue my right hand rested on my forehead). The first thing I remember right before going into surgery was my mom asking if my nipple piercings were one of the objects that could catch on fire. I get to leave them on? *Ok cool, please proceed.* The first thing I remember after waking up from surgery was *do you want cranberry juice or apple juice? And well at least it'll be fun to try again, right? Or was I still high.*

To have an abortion and start dating, to have an abortion and keep dating, to have an abortion and keep making love. That was the plan so of course I told myself I was recovered in a few days so I wouldn't have to back out of going to Las Vegas with him. My souvenirs from Vegas: no more lover, my other grandmother passing away, and a how to on losing my anti love look in the eyes of my mother. Honorably mentioned: how to lose your left fallopian tube, and how to search for yourself in love again, how to fix a blood-stained mattress or just leave it behind like your zip code, how to wonder if you're just drunk and in love because this is starting to feel like your fathers' habits, oh and how to win a bet you didn't realize or just forgot that you made with yourself. It was going to clear in the long run,

like the blood embarked, sometimes remarkably made stained in the same spot. I want to immortalize this, maybe in an imaginary memoir titled “everywhere that I have left my period stains” even if it all technically wasn’t a period, it was a period piece ok, and she lasted weeks. The sensation of fighting words is like this; the pool forming in my abdomen and then spilling the next day in the color of crimson, I left my mattress stained even more from the free bleeding when the bandages couldn’t hold any longer, I took help from my mom to get on and off the toilet, and it hurt to breathe from the extra oxygen pumped in me. Three more things: fertility cut in half, obsessed, bedbound (check check and check?)

Speaking of, my post op checkup was weird, there was nothing about it that felt brief to explain to this practitioner about what happened in my body four weeks ago. *Damn dude, you’re not embarrassed? You know what, good for you.* Ending a non- viable pregnancy, or tubal pregnancy and then tubal rupture, or come on you know, Ectopic.

Ec•top•ic

/ek täpik/

Adjective

In an abnormal place or position

1. It comes from the prefix ecto, meaning “out of place” meaning everything that was to come between him and I was just that.
2. It still comes from creation, manifestation, and rejection and if I was a fortune teller who could tell that my body would reject his seed, in a way, then I would’ve known to reject the way he entered my life
3. I couldn’t possibly reject him though, however fantasizing, I maybe would’ve prevented the quarrel inside of me on the way to the emergency room the quarrel between my lungs, my heart, my belly, my come down
4. An argument bursting and bleeding and breaking inside of me

Please, just tell me HOW CAN I GET RID OF THESE TINY LITTLE SCARS that are only large when I feel them, but my question is muttered by a definition. My soft soft belly scars, that have now been kissed, that have now been met with the lightest touch of my baby sisters’ fingertips. In some way to me, this looks like ovaries holding hands. It all feels like a mix of public policy and personal experience, visceral sometimes, like navigating the curves and modern times, both in or on my body and in this world. How else would I give myself permission to grieve something I never wanted in

the first place. So many things I meet like damn, I wish that one poem was my own and at 38 years old, I will recite it again like it is, because it too will be an anniversary of 13 years to me by then. To grieve something, I never wanted, in the first place.

Pee is for Pregnant

Ky Gerbush

ESSAY

From eighth grade until my sophomore year, my school outsourced sex education classes to a woman named Mrs. Pickett, who appeared in our school for one week each semester. In the early 2000s, in suburban Indiana, it might seem surprising that we had such consistent sex education, but that would be based on unfounded confidence in the course's content. My best guess is that the school administration thought it would be less embarrassing for an outsider to disseminate the disinformation mandated by Indiana's policy called "Abstinence-Plus Education." Politicians wanted schools to push the idea that the best choice that any teenager could make, was to remain abstinent until they found themselves in state-legitimized, heterosexual marriages. Failing that, they wanted us to know that birth control was ineffective, and sex was dangerous or as Mrs. Pickett would repeatedly chastise, "They might stop you from getting pregnant or contracting an STD *sometimes*, but there is no condom that is big enough to protect your heart."

Mrs. Pickett had short, spiky brown hair, she was tall, and had a loud, nasal voice. After her classes, my peers would whisper the word *lesbian*. On the days we were held captive in her classroom, Mrs. Pickett referred to her curriculum as, "Creating Positive Relationships" or "as life saving as the other CPR."

Puberty came to my body early, triangle shaped cones of fat forming on my pale chest, but my sexuality lagged. In middle school my attention lingered on my female friends. I was one of the last children to abandon playing on the swings. I was perplexed by questions about crushes. For me, Mrs. Pickett's classes were unbearable; sitting in the small room of twenty desks, everyone else seemed to be sweating. Oppressive silence filled the room, as my peers buzzed with an uncomfortable, electric energy. My eyelids drooped, my mind rebelled against the indignity of having my recess reallocated. I longed for my childhood.

We were greeted with progressively alarming claims by this woman who had been given unsupervised dominion over us. When I look back now, the things she told us seem like a fever dream. Once we were all told to spit

into a dixie cup that we passed around. After everyone had contributed, Mrs. Pickett held the cup up and proclaimed,

“This is exactly what semen looks, smells, and tastes like.”

I had to restrain my laughter. There were boys in the classroom with us, squirming in their seats. Surely one of them would be compelled to correct Mrs. Pickett on her strange semen interpretation?

Through the years, Mrs. Pickett’s stories and illustrations grew in intensity, informing us that our lives were at stake, and even once linking pre-marital sex to suicide. We left class, day after day, reassured that condoms did not work and they would make your male partner unhappy, and that all STDs could make you sterile.

The focus of the class was so male. We were never given information about women’s bodies, beyond declaring that the “underwear zone” was a sacred and forbidden space. We were not informed about anything that could go awry in a uterus regardless of sexual activity. The class always concluded on the same note, we were asked to sign “Abstinence Pledges.” We were reassured that they were anonymous, and told that even if we had already been sexually active we could sign the pledge and choose “secondary abstinence.”

My true sexual education came from a much more realistic and raw source. My eighth grade year, my older sister discovered she was pregnant. My mother called a family meeting. We gathered in our living room - my sister notably absent. I had seen her red-faced and heading towards the bathroom. My mother, whose will reigned supreme over our family, spoke,

“Your sister is getting an abortion. We will be taking her out of state and you will be staying with your grandmother. Your father does not agree with this decision, but he is coming with us.”

My father’s disagreement remained written on his face, eyes narrowed and avoiding the faces of his children, but he did not object.

“You will not talk about this at school. You will not tell your friends. You will only talk to Bailey about this if she brings it up. Her boyfriend’s family doesn’t want this. But your sister is seventeen years old, and it is her body,

and her future, and this is what we have decided. I got an abortion, and your grandmother got an abortion too. This is our right, this is how we control our lives. I don't care what you think about this. But I need to know that you all understand what I am telling you."

I remember crying, and thinking of my elementary school best friend, Anne, who often wore a shirt on the weekend with, "It's a Child, Not a Choice," printed in bold letters. My mother had drawn a clear line, my family was defined by strong women and the women in our family apparently got abortions. They left, they returned, our family moved on.

I started dating my first boyfriend the summer before my senior year of high school. It felt like a decision not based on romance or sexual attraction, but more because my family was deteriorating rapidly. My parents' rocky marriage ended a year earlier. That summer my father had a suicide attempt and spent several weeks in the ICU. When he was released, he packed his clothing into his truck and said he was, "Just going somewhere warm, where I can lay down and die."

My mother transitioned from a "binge" alcoholic into just an alcoholic. I started finding whiskey bottles not just behind our washing machine, but also in the glove box of our car. I was coping with it all by acting like nothing was happening and finding reasons to never be home. I spent most of my time with my friend Sarah. I was always welcomed at her house, greeted warmly by her parents, given extra moments of attention. I thought they had no idea what was happening in my home life.

That summer Sarah's father took us to a baseball game, and introduced me to a man named Steve who had a son in our grade, Jared. Steve was tall, kind, and family-oriented. I remember I liked him right away, but I also remember his winking comment, "I'll have to tell my son to be careful around you."

Starting to date Jared, I felt like I was choosing stability. I knew that he was interested in me because he thought I would have sex with him, but even if our relationship was somewhat transactional, it felt like a good deal. Jared bought me my favorite flowers every month, white lilies and red roses, increasing the number of roses to represent each month we are together. I was welcomed to dinner at his house. His family brought me to church, his parents told me they loved me.

I started having sex with Jared a week after we started dating. I wanted it to feel like a reclaiming of my body, like I was telling myself that in the midst of all the bad in my life I deserved to be loved. But it mostly just felt like the next step in our “relationship.” I obtained birth control pills, and took them meticulously. I had no care for the consequences or potential side effects. I never thought of Mrs. Pickett and the four separate “Abstinence Until Marriage Pledges” that I had signed. And her class never veered into useful information about birth control, such as its side effects. Those twenty-eight foiled wrapped pills told me that I owned my body - and I could give it away to anyone I wanted.

That fall, Jared convinced me to pick up an after-school shift at the dry cleaners where he worked. When he suggested it, I thought it was because he understood how much I was struggling. That he understood that the job could help me gain a sense of control. That the money I earned would be put towards college, and I could pull the future I wanted towards myself. Later, he would tell me though that he had always fantasized about having sex at work, and thought it would be easier to do if we both worked at the same place.

As responsible as I was, fear stayed with me. I felt like not getting pregnant was solely my job. Jared reinforced this with his silence. I had never tracked my period before taking birth control, so I had no sense of how it was changing my cycle. I attributed feeling overly emotional to my family. When I started having monthly panic attacks when my period did not arrive on an exact day, I thought it was because some deep part of me knew I was predestined for a teen pregnancy. Late one night, after experiencing slight cramping but no period, an internet search convinced me that the cramps were from “pre-implantation” and that all my birth control side effects were early pregnancy indicators.

I went to work the next day trying to use the monotony to suppress my panic. I was alone with piles of men’s dirty shirts, surrounded by chemicals and large machines that tidied other people’s lives. My hands shook so badly that I stabbed myself with the safety pin I was trying to use to label a shirt. I decided to call the only person I felt I was allowed to - my mother. She appeared one hour later and brought an “early detection” test along with something to drink so that I could produce the requisite amount of pee. She seemed happy to be the person I called, oblivious that depending on her made me nauseous. I downed the liquid, and stoically went to the

small bathroom in the back. I paused to give my mother brief instructions in case any customers came in. That small plastic stick felt like the only thing solid in my life, but I knew that the laundry still needed to be done.

The bathroom was small, and dark. The door didn't shut completely, but I was obscured from view by the rows of clothing. I scanned the directions, reading each line slowly. I sat there in that dim toilet and decided to attempt the "pee-straight-on-the-stick" method. I watched as the urine moved across it, watched as it turned the control line blue. I held my breath, suspending myself in that moment, hoping that the chemical reaction would be suspended as well.

I knew that I should consider myself lucky. If the test was positive, I knew what would happen. There was no question that I would be allowed to get an abortion, and that my mother would help me. I knew I could count on her in all the ways that I didn't want to. Getting an abortion didn't feel like a choice. Still, I felt a promise inside me breaking, the idea that my body could be mine, that I could control it, that I could experience pleasure without consequence. That I could be allowed to keep my body for myself.

The knowledge that I could obtain an abortion did not comfort me. It made me feel like a failure. I had believed I could be better. I had believed that I could parent myself. I already had so many unspeakable realities crushing me. I understood who I was socially, how I was perceived. I knew why my boyfriend's parents took me to church. I could almost hear Jared's father's words again, "I will have to tell my son to be careful around you." I did not want to carry this as part of my story.

I don't want this. I don't want this. I don't want this.

When the strip remained a minus sign, I let a few quick tears slide down my face. And all I could think of was putting this experience back inside its box, packing it away. Not a teenage pregnancy. I had this situation, just like everything else, under control. I could remain the person I wanted to be. I breathed again, thinking only of stashing my paychecks each week, and imagining the life that awaited me if I remained a good, responsible, non-pregnant person. I brought the test out to my mother. I hugged her, she left. I continued to fold chemical-laden shirts for nameless businessmen.

I left this experience with new determination. I went to the gynecologist

and requested a rarer form of birth control, a hormonal IUD. In 2007 in Indiana, young women did not get IUDs, but the Mirena was being heavily advertised as a good choice for women who had already had children. My gynecologist advised me that it would be painful to have it placed because he would have to dilate my cervix, but this form of birth control promised no-maintenance and a failure rate of 0.7%. He told me someone should drive me to my appointment because I probably would be in pain. I nodded along, and then came to the appointment alone. I flinched when it was installed, but reported to him that, "It barely hurt at all." Alone in my car, I called my older sister, and asked her to stay on the phone as I cried.

It worked. All through my twenties, I didn't get pregnant. I broke up with Jared in the spring of our freshman year of college. Not after he slapped me in the face. Not after he publicly posted an essay admitting he was cheating on me. Only after a friend convinced me to join a sorority, and surrounded by a group of women, I felt like I didn't need him anymore.

After college, I felt like I had done the impossible. I had left my past behind. I graduated college, I had met the right people, done the right things. I had markers of my past, but I was mostly unscathed. I was aware of the odds that I had defied, because the rest of my family hadn't. My siblings had drifted off to become single parents, and become lost in struggles with drugs and depression. I reveled in my life, but I started to experience extreme period pains. Each month, I would lay on the wooden floor of my boyfriend's town home, and cry until I fell asleep because it hurt too much to move into the bed. I was diagnosed with endometriosis. I tried everything, cycling through treatments recommended by my gynecologist. On November 8th, 2016 I had surgery. I woke up in recovery and the first question I asked was if the election was over. I spent the next week crying, afraid of what was next for my body and it felt like the world was crying alongside me.

I healed slowly, and the surgery worked. My symptoms subsided, my life moved on. I met a kind man, and I cut off all contact with my parents. Some days I would cry about my mother, pull my phone out and stare at it, longing to call her but knowing that if I did I would be greeted by a snarling, drunk stranger. Most days I felt an intense joy. I got married. In 2020, we bought a house and started renovating. We were building our own future.

My symptoms began to return - pain, panic. I turned to the internet, and

found forums that discussed the ways hormones could worsen endometriosis pain. This was an idea I had heard before, but I had never felt that I could afford to go off birth control. I saw avoiding pregnancy as the main factor that had allowed me to build this life. But now, I could reconsider. I was finally here, finally safe. I knew that I did not want to have children, and thought even if I got pregnant, terminating a pregnancy would no longer bear any consequences. I had my IUD removed, went off all birth control.

My pain abated - along with symptoms I had never considered. I stopped bruising as easily, I suddenly wasn't cold all the time. I had more energy, my anxiety shrank. I felt more in tune with my body. Mrs. Pickett's CPR class had instilled in me a belief that pregnancy was something that could happen at any time, that it was just waiting to sneak up on you the moment you started having sex. But, I started to learn the rhythm of my body, when I would be fertile, when my period would arrive.

I let my hair grow out. I leaned into being in touch with my body, and the earth. I planted a flower garden. I didn't get pregnant, and I didn't get pregnant, and I didn't get pregnant.

Until I did.

Fall of 2021, my family gathered at my mother-in-law's house for the first real gathering we had had since COVID started. I noticed something slight, sore breasts, dewy skin. I pressed the thought from my mind, I told myself that it was the stress of the pandemic.

When we returned home on Monday, I rushed inside urgently hissing that I needed to pee.

Our house had been fully torn apart as we renovated. The only room that remained untouched by our sledge hammers was the small central bathroom - dimly lit and with a door that hung so unevenly we always left it open. For the first time, I fought the door, with its many layers of paint, shut. I ripped a pregnancy test from its crinkling, white wrapping. My hands trembled as pee splattered on them along with the test. I froze with the physical knowledge that shame is often a feeling you can't outrun. The test was positive.

I walked into the room where my husband was, handed him the test, and collapsed awkwardly into a hammock we had set up because we didn't own a couch. Tears streamed down my face as we tried to talk, but I couldn't explain what was rising inside me. I stopped crying and I walked outside with my phone. I called a friend and yelled into the phone that I was pregnant.

"You can change your mind about not wanting to have children, you're allowed to keep this baby."

I hung up.

I dialed the number of a friend who, years before, had told me she had had an abortion.

I walked through my yard repeating, "I don't want this. I don't want this. I don't want this."

Her response was simple, "Then you don't have to."

I burned with the logistics of what came next. I called Planned Parenthood located 30 minutes away. I started counting the rings convinced that I should wait one more. I remembered all the articles about nurse shortages. *Only essential medical care. No crossing state lines.* The closest clinics to us were all out of state - and they weren't answering their phones. I went back into the house, and told my husband that I was driving to Planned Parenthood. I grabbed the car keys, he drove.

When we arrived, it was deserted. Taped to the door was a piece of paper with a phone number. A reassuring male voice answered, and I said desperately, "I need to terminate a pregnancy." My throat felt tight, something inside me twisted at the thought of using the word, "abortion."

I got an appointment for the following week at a clinic three hours away. I spent the interim walking around my yard and noticing the flowers, feeling the breeze. I lingered in the fertile world, bursting with life. I tried to talk to my husband but I couldn't find the words. I felt foolish for thinking I could go off of hormones, I blamed myself for faulty tracking. I thought of Mrs. Pickett, but I thought more of my sister, and how the first Mother's Day after her abortion she had spent the day sobbing, "None of you even

asked me if today was hard for me.”

COVID dictated that I leave my husband in the parking lot. I wore a face mask and was shown into a room. A doctor arrived. I remember nothing about her other than my relief that she was female. She was sparse with her words. I declined the ultrasound she offered. She told me that I had to take one pill in front of her, and could take the second pill in the clinic or at home. She told me I should take Tylenol liberally. Before I took the first pill, she said, “Thank you for trusting us. You’re doing something important.”

I took both pills in the clinic, and left with a second pill to take in 24 hours, if bleeding hadn’t started. The next day, when no cramping, or bleeding occurred, I called the clinic. They instructed me to take the second pill. Again, nothing happened. I called back and they told me to wait a week and take another pregnancy test. The test was negative. My period didn’t return for a month.

I had lost trust in my body and my ability to control it. I resumed taking birth control. My endometriosis symptoms returned, my anxiety increased.

I didn’t have words to explain what this experience had done to me, the ways it made me feel worthless, stupid. How I felt like it confirmed that I was an irresponsible human, a bad wife, and unworthy of the family and friends I had built around me. I was wrestling with social programming I believed I had left behind. Mrs. Pickett didn’t show up in my classroom because abstinence only education prevents people from getting pregnant. She was there because it makes women feel exactly what I was feeling. There is no way to know how much Mrs. Pickett’s class impacted the eventuality of me getting an abortion, shaped my choices, made me fearful of my own body. But without Mrs. Pickett, and Jared’s parents, and “It’s a Child, Not a Choice” t-shirts, maybe this story would be less heavy for me to hold.

I struggled to discuss the abortion, I couldn’t make sense of it. I had a positive test, took abortion pills, nothing happened, and then had a negative test. The day *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, I came home and told my husband that I was going to get sterilized.

My world became logistics again. I selected a hospital. I called our insurance company to confirm coverage. I drove to Boston twice, once to sign a State-mandated legal document stating that I understood what sterilization was,

and once for a pre-op appointment, where I calmly explained to a female doctor with a rainbow pronoun pin on her lanyard that, “Yes, I understand what sterilization means.”

Again, because of COVID I had to walk through the doors into pre-op alone. I put on a purple gown with a logo of a bear. I carefully braided my hair. My biggest worry was that if I left my hair down they would tie it up in an uncomfortable way and I would wake up with a headache. I photographed myself and sent it to my husband, “See you on the other side.”

Soon I would be in a drug induced sleep. Soon my body would be wheeled away, inverted, sliced into. Soon parts of me would become “specimens” and would be carted in one direction as my body went another. Soon I would wake up in a recovery room, and respond to a middle-aged male nurse asking me if there was anything I needed, “Will you hold my hand?” Soon my body would feel bruised, puffy, foreign. Soon my body would have swollen shades of purple and blue that would slowly fade to greens and yellows.

As I waited to be taken back into the operating theater, everyone involved in my surgery introduced themselves. My gynecologist and three medical residents, my anesthesiologist, and the recovery nurse who would later hold my hand. I was left alone for about thirty minutes, and I started to cry. I thought of seventeen year old me, the girl who knew that a pregnancy would tie her to her boyfriend, who thought she was the type of girl who would have sex with him at work. Who knew a pregnancy would confirm that she was the type of girl from whom sons must be protected. The girl who so desperately needed a community that an oppressive relationship became a bargain. I was now surrounded by a diligent medical team. I was not alone. My husband waited as close by as medical staff would allow. We would leave the hospital together and stay with family to recover. I had a life full of friends, of community, of nothing that felt like a compromise or compression of myself. My pre-op nurse came to check on me and found me crying. I couldn't express to her my overwhelming feeling, that in making my body a place where no other person would ever live, it became a place that felt safe enough for me.

Conditions Not of Our Own Making

Elizabeth Aeschlimann

ESSAY

June 23rd, 2022. *My dad's birthday. Six New Cases of Monkeypox Reported in Massachusetts. Biden Pushes Congress for a Three Month Gas-Tax Holiday.*

I have been tracking my ovulation for 17 cycles. One year, six months, and ten days. I am my dad's tour guide while he and his girlfriend visit us in Boston. I am about to ovulate. We tour Concord with a slight South African woman, and walk the loop around Walden Pond. I want them to see the magic in it, in the soft, pine needle-covered paths and in the glint of sunlight on the water. I want them to see how it makes the world feel a little more hopeful. We sit next to the water and read a few inscrutable passages from Thoreau, but I'm not sure they do.

In the evening, we collect my wife, Rachie, and celebrate my dad's birthday at a fancy farm to table restaurant. I order a glass of wine, reasoning that it may be my last for the next two weeks while I wait to learn whether I am pregnant. I don't let myself dwell on the possibility that it may be my last glass of wine for the next ten months. Over the past year of attempts, I have been pregnant once. Then, seven weeks later, I wasn't pregnant anymore.

June 24th, 2022. *Supreme Court Strikes Down New York Law Limiting Guns in Public. Severe Flooding in China Displaces Hundreds of Thousands of People. Bloodhound Wins Best in Show at Westminster Dog Show.*

My dad and his girlfriend will pick Rachie and me up at 11am, and the four of us will drive to Maine for the weekend.

I have been hoping for another day or two of near-peak ovulation, so that we can inseminate when we return from Maine. I've filled out the intake paperwork for a midwife who will come to our home and perform an IUI, but there's no time to call. Instead, I wake up to a cheerful smiley face on the Ovulation Predictor Kit. Peak fertility. I resign myself to sub-optimal timing, and one last month of pure DIY fertility.

Our donor arrives around 8am. After roughly 25 inseminations over the

past year, we have our routine down. Rachie puts the small mason jar on the bathroom sink, I fish the extra pillow out of the closet, and our Generous Sperm Factory arrives. After a few pleasantries and updates, we head out to the porch with our coffee. The GSF does his thing in the bathroom while we work on the crossword, sip our coffee, and wave at the neighbors walking by with their dogs. The moment we hear the GSF on the stairs, we're up, exchanging quick goodbyes as we pass in the hallway.

We joke that we should start a line of greeting cards for sperm donors. "Would you like to donate... 100 million sperm?" After awkward conversations with four male acquaintances unaided by Hallmark, I noticed the GSF in a zoom Shabbat service holding a baby. "What about him?" I asked Rachie. "That baby looks pretty cute." "You know, that's a great idea," Rachie replied. She drafted an email. Subject line: "a question for you..."

Rachie retrieves the mason jar from the bathroom while I rush to strip off my pants and get into bed, positioning the pillow under my hips in a halfhearted bridge pose. I avoid focusing on the milky substance in the bottom of the jar while my wife draws the liquid into a blunt-tipped oral syringe. It's my job to insert the tube, guiding it towards my cervix; it's her job to press down the plunger of the syringe, slowly depositing it inside me.

Months ago, I realized that it was much more pleasant to think of the sperm as female, and that led to the next step of the ritual, perhaps not medically recommended, but critical nonetheless. Rachie and I make eye contact. "All my swimming ladies—all my swimming ladies, all my swimming ladies—all my swimming ladies, put your tails up! Up in the air, go and swim to the egg..." our Beyoncé re-write lags, but we belt out the final line, "If you like it then you should fertilize it!"

Then the time is our own: 45 minutes to fill, or not, however we choose. Some things we have done over the course of two dozen inseminations: completing the daily crossword, finishing a graphic novel, talking about the future, having sex, watching WNBA games. On that June morning, we opened the New York Times Spelling Bee app and listed all the words we could identify scrambled among the day's 7 letters: A-E-M-N-P-T-V. Letters that, like the random recombination of DNA, could be arranged in an impossibly large number of sequences. MEN TAMP PAVEMENT AMEN.

It was a beautiful day, sunny and cool. I went out to the garden to pick lettuce and spray the aphids luxuriating in the kale. We showered and

packed, layers for the early Maine summer. Rachie put the week's New Yorker in her bag and was ready in ten minutes. I took longer weighing the merits of each sweater and pair of shoes, and filling ziplock bags with snacks for the ride.

Rachie saw it first, as she put up her email away message and scrolled absentmindedly to her news app.

In 6-3 Ruling, Supreme Court Ends Nearly 50 Years of Abortion Rights.

It was a dagger, it was numbness, it was resignation, it was fury. We had known it was coming. Had been learning for weeks about mifepristone and misoprostol. Had felt the relief of the bright blue borders around our own state of Massachusetts. Had talked to friends and family in Texas and Missouri readying themselves to break the law if necessary. Had felt, newly, the widening gyre of consequences, and the newly personal realization that miscarriage care, too, would be regulated and curtailed.

Below the headline, the article noted Justice Thomas' opinion that the ruling called into question the court's decisions legalizing contraception, gay sex, and same-sex marriage. I thought of our wedding, one year after Obergefell v. Hodges guaranteed same-sex couples the right to marry. The memory was sun-soaked and giddy, an artifact of a time before. The sturdy table of our little lives wobbled with precarity.

But mostly, I thought of my mom. I knew she would be devastated in a way I could not quite comprehend. In 1973, when *Roe* was decided, she was 23, married to her high school boyfriend, and working as a nursery school teacher while her husband attended a law school that excluded women from admission. In the basement of the New Haven Women's Liberation Center, she joined a consciousness raising group, then helped other women start groups of their own. Several years later, divorced and working towards a degree in psychology, she aborted her own pregnancy legally. For my mother, choice has always been about freedom.

Later that day, my mother wrote to me and my brother: *I am sick at heart. This was so important to grandma and always has been to me. All the personal rights that were based on this precedent are at risk and every forward movement of women (and sometimes men) require the*

opportunity to choose. Girls I knew dropped out of high school, college and careers. Friends who had illegal abortions almost died. You know I had an abortion, clean and safe, legal by only a few years. I really want to do something about this.

I wanted to be with her, wanted to respond, but I didn't think I could hold myself together through her despair. Instead, Rachie and I got in the car with my dad. There was nothing I felt I could say to bridge the gap between how I felt and whatever my father was experiencing. I didn't want to know, didn't want to hear from any man on this day, no matter how politically aligned. We put on a series of innocuous podcasts and drove five hours through Friday afternoon traffic to Maine. The swimming ladies barrelled relentlessly forward, through my cervix and into organs and passageways newly regulated by distant legal edicts.

My wife and I were not sure we wanted to have a child at all. Our uncertainty lasted years. On the "no" side, we liked our lives the way they were, liked sleeping in and spending evenings with friends and reading uninterrupted for hours on a Saturday afternoon. We also feared climate chaos, and knew the world we would be bringing a child into would be filled with uncertainty and loss.

Rachie grew up never suspecting that she would consider not having children. In her Orthodox community, she assumed she would be married by 25. Two children would have been modest, one kid skimpy, and none unthinkable. I, on the other hand, always imagined I'd reproduce late in life like my mother, who had me at 38. By the time I was born, she was an established and successful psychologist who could afford to drop us off at school in the mornings and pick us up when the bell rang at 3:10pm.

What changed things for me was when a friend who spent her days looking at maps of sea level rise eating away Boston's coastline told me she had decided, finally, she wanted to live her life from hope, not fear. But in 2018, with Trump in the oval office and existential attacks on survival and human dignity every other day, long term thinking felt impossible. Rachie spent her days as an organizer navigating ever more draconian measures to punish undocumented immigrants, and raising funds to bond people out of jail. I had joined that fight too, attending meetings at a local church that had opened its doors to an undocumented family seeking sanctuary.

When Trump was defeated in 2020, I was in the Walden Woods, contemplating not civil disobedience, but the sun and the pine needles drifting lazily to the ground. I want to have a kid, I thought.

We make decisions in a political landscape, whether we know it or not. As my professor used to paraphrase Marx, “We make history in conditions not of our own making.” Some days, the sun is shining and freedom feels a little more real. Some days, five men and one woman in robes condemn millions of women to unwanted pregnancies, increased violence, and death.

Sperm can take as little as 30 minutes and as long as several days to reach the egg, so we will never know when exactly fertilization occurred. But after nine months of attempts, it was this egg, this sperm, this June morning when half the country lost their right to choose, that turned into the pregnancy I’m carrying today. That will turn into our daughter.

There is only so much we can ever choose, only so much we can ever know. And life, undecided upon, happens to us in a political landscape, whether we know it or not. This growing fetus who will become our daughter did not decide to be born, did not decide whether or not to exist. She will make history in conditions not of her own making.

In Maine, we checked into a little inn overlooking Main Street. Rachie and I held each other, wrote some messages, cried. There was no protest, no press conference, no sign that cells were fusing and dividing inside my body. But from our balcony, we could see a sliver of the harbor spilling out into the sea.

A Chance at Life

Bethany DeRuiter

ESSAY

One morning, in the Spring of 1990, after drinking my morning coffee around 9am, I felt a surge of nausea rising from the deepest part of my belly, rising up through my stomach, my chest, my throat, and into my head. It was all I could do to get to the bathroom in time before erupting a stream of yellow bile into the toilet. I thought I was hungover and took an Alka Selzer; an hour later I felt better. But the next morning, after my morning coffee, the nausea returned. Again, at mid-morning, I threw up yellow bile, and followed it with an aspirin and Alka Selzer. An hour later I felt better. When it happened again, in the same way on the third morning, I suspected I was pregnant. This was a familiar experience – I had been pregnant three years earlier (and had relinquished the baby for adoption). But this time it was stronger and more violent. This time my belly tightened up so strongly that I moaned when I heaved the sticky yellow substance from my stomach and mouth into the toilet. I tried to be quiet, but my body wouldn't allow that. I just kept heaving and moaning.

A drug store pregnancy test confirmed I was pregnant. When I saw the results, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I immediately contacted the man I had had sex with (let's call him Jack) and told him the news and what I wanted to do. He agreed with my decision. I then called a local women's clinic and made an appointment for an abortion for one day the following week.

I was in my late 20s. I worked as a litigation paralegal in a downtown law firm in Portland, OR. I was financially stable but living paycheck to paycheck. I did not want to be a parent. Several years after college, I was still paying off a student loan, and was just starting to feel like I was creating a life for myself, establishing my identity at work, in the community and in my own psyche. I enjoyed working long hours on exciting large cases at work and had ambitions of getting promoted. I was taking writing classes at Portland State. I loved walking around the city on weekends, hiking near Multnomah Falls, and meeting friends for dinner at restaurants or live music events at night clubs. I looked forward to my weekly sessions with my Jungian therapist, then browsing through Cameron's or Powell's or Renaissance Books afterwards to read up on everything we talked about. I wanted to

spend my life developing myself, growing emotionally, and learning to do what I needed to live the best version of myself and to be a productive member of society. I loved the life I was creating for myself and had no desire or instinct to take care of a baby or to be a mother.

Earth Day, 1990. I walked to the park near the Willamette River for an Earth Day celebration. The green leaves of the Portland trees formed a verdant canopy across and around the city. Walking to the rally at the river, the air was misty, having just rained and on pause before more rain. The streets were wet, the smell of damp leaves filled the air. The nausea came over me in waves, agitated by the stench emanating from the paper mills across the river. A dank, stale sharp scent mixed with moldy smell of pulp. I felt physically weak and sick, and I just wanted to feel better.

People milled about the decorated grounds in REI blue and orange raingear, hoodies and printed tees. After throwing up earlier, I thought I would feel better any minute. I told myself I just had to make it through this one day. I tried to pretend like I was enjoying the day, I was excited to celebrate Earth Day, keeping the earth healthy and wise, a promise for the future. But all I wanted was to get home and get under the covers and wait out my nausea until the day I would not be pregnant anymore.

On the day of the appointment, Jack picked me up at my apartment. When we arrived at the clinic, he sat with me while I filled out the paperwork in the lobby. I completed the forms and paid the clinic in cash. The procedure cost \$300, \$150 from each of us. We didn't speak much. Jack was gentle, kind and supportive. He let me lead this process.

The clinic assistants invited me back to an examining room. They examined and tested me to confirm that I was pregnant and then gently reviewed the abortion process with me, asking if I had any questions or concerns. They were so kind and reassuring, reminding me often that everything was going to be OK. One of the nurses explained that they were first going to place a seaweed insert into my vagina to help dilate my cervix. I was to wait two hours then come back and they would perform the abortion. They said it may feel uncomfortable, but it shouldn't hurt and when I felt any pressure, it just meant that everything was working.

Jack and I left the clinic and found a park to hang out in for two hours. We walked together through the park, resting every so often on the benches

along the path. There was a stone fence to the right and I remember thinking how beautiful and strong it appeared to me. I was doing the right thing. The April air was crisp and refreshing. I was so happy to be getting this done! My stomach hurt a little, and I felt some pressure inside just like they said, but I did not worry.

When we returned to the clinic, I was escorted back the operating room. There was a male doctor in the room who would perform the procedure, along with two female nurses. The doctor explained everything that was going to happen, what I would hear and how long it would take. I was calm and relaxed, confident in their expertise. The operating room was very clean and smelled of disinfectants. I felt gentle hands on me, preparing my body for the machines that would terminate the pregnancy. During the procedure, just as they had explained, I heard the machines humming and after about a minute or so, I realized that all of a sudden, the nausea just disappeared! What a relief! The whole procedure took just a few minutes.

When Jack and I left the clinic, the air felt fresh and cool on the walk to his car. I was so relieved and grateful that this had ended my nausea but also all the concerns and what-ifs that were clouding my thoughts every minute of every day. I did not have to worry about having to live my life caring for a child I did not want. I chose MY life, to do what I wanted and needed for MY life. I chose to live MY full creative self. I exercised MY rights to take care of my own body and I did what was right for ME. I did not allow this fetus to develop any further. It was the responsible thing to do. There was no purpose in forcing myself to be a mother, and no moral authority to do so either.

I have always been grateful for the doctors and nurses that took care of me with their professional expertise and compassion on the day of my abortion. I was treated with respect and dignity. I felt safe and supported. The fetus was not a baby. It was not a child. I have no regrets or sadness. I am grateful for my wonderful full life today. I was strong and made a strong decision. I was healthy and made a healthy decision. I was wise and made a wise decision. I did the right thing and am still really so proud of myself. My life would look very differently today if I had been forced to be a mother when I was not ready and did not want to.

I am writing this story for any woman who feels afraid and alone with an unwanted pregnancy. By sharing my experience, I hope to help even one

other woman with the choice to secure an abortion when she needs one or wants one. I want to join the chorus of others who have had abortions to remind even one other woman that abortion may be the care you need to live her best life. My abortion did that for me. I have lived my best life because I made the choice for abortion.

Punctuation

Elizabeth Russo

VIGNETTE

A comma is no way to end a thing. A semicolon, she could maybe live with. But the unresolved chord of the comma offers no solace. And that's what her experience of loss was when it wasn't followed by a whole 'nother human consuming her maternal focus. Her miscarriage was gory and mood destabilizing, but that period ended with a live birth, her second. Her husband said no to more. We have enough on our plate, he said. But she liked heaping plates. There's always room for dessert. The three-course meal of children. Just a dollop more of child-bearing. What a surprise when she became pregnant again! She felt like Sarah in the Bible, wanting to laugh at her geriatric pregnancy. She'd gotten to dreading surprises. Surprise job terminations. Surprise injuries. Surprise deaths. But, lo, surprises could be blessings! And, this hope-filled journey felt every bit the blessing until – surprise – it terminated. They terminated. She terminated her child-bearing years with a comma. A comma is no way to end a thing.

Untitled

Mollie McLeod

ESSAY

I stared, disassociating from the reflection in the mirrored closet door: a naked eighteen year-old girl lying on her side, with his arm hanging across her shoulders. He wasn't a large man but all one hundred and ten pounds of her fit against him in his relaxed caress. Once he finished, he'd routinely wiped his semen off her abdomen before settling in to fall asleep in the mess of her hair on his pillow, but her eyes—my eyes—were wide open. I could feel my heart pounding, hear it echoing in my ears. I saw her blink when I blink, breathe when I breathe, but something about her just wasn't me.

After a few days, when I couldn't handle it on my own anymore, I came forward with the facts: My period is late. I took a pregnancy test, it was negative. But something's wrong.

"Okay, well, you use protection, right?" Mom asked.

"Uh, yeah," I lied. We didn't. But how could I tell her: my thirty-eight-year-old boyfriend can't keep an erection with a condom on, he says it just doesn't feel the same... "I mean, most of the time." Another lie.

"Huh. Okay." She seemed unconvinced. "We'll get another test. A pack of two, this time."

Then I was standing alone in basement bathroom again, the first test on the edge of the sink in front of me. I watched as the control line appeared, the little screen darkening.

"Mom..." I said unsurely, keeping my eyes on this piece of plastic revealing my future.

"Mom?" I called again, leaning my hands on the counter to look closely at the test without picking it up. I could feel my heart quickening, my breath shallowing, as both lines turned from faded to solid blue.

"Mom!" I screamed.

I didn't hear her come down the stairs, she just appeared and stood in the open doorway. As I turned toward her she looked at me in a way I can't quite describe but will always remember: tight half-smile, furrowed brow but sympathetic eyes, an expression of knowing what's coming... like when you see something fall and cringe before it even hits the ground.

She held her arms out as I but I avoided her embrace by pacing around the bathroom, repeating "Oh god" through each short exhale.

"Sweetie, come here," Mom reached her arms out again. "Mollie, please, it's okay—"

"No!" I yelled, pushing away. I stopped walking and stared at her for a moment, wide-eyed and hyperventilating. When I continued to refuse her offers of comfort, she said she would be right back and returned upstairs to call the doctor.

In my bedroom, I called him. I tried to say "I'm pregnant" but I was crying so hard my words were gibberish and he was silent on the other end. The moments when I paused to catch my breath he would casually ask, "What's wrong?" Each time I thought he'd heard me I held my breath, awaiting a reaction, but he simply asked again. I was getting frustrated, thinking I was expressing myself as clearly as I could... so I hung up.

I'd stopped pacing and was leaning against the wall below the window. When I answered the phone and heard his question again, I finally screamed: "I have to get an abortion!" Then I was quiet, breathing heavily as I listened to his uncertain silence. All he said was: "Oh."

My breath was quickening again when he sighed, then groaned: "Oh, no..." in a way that sounded primarily like an expression of inconvenience, followed once again by silence; and I hung up again.

I pictured him in one of those little video-editing workrooms, exiting through the back into the IT department, having taken the call without ever leaving his office. Did he turn to his friends, or did they see a look on his face and ask: What's wrong? Then hear his answer: *Remember Mollie, the young girl that hangs around, who I started sleeping with? She just called to tell me she's pregnant.* Did the group of geeky tech guys respond shocked, or concerned? For me, or for the possibility of their buddy being

forced into fatherhood if she decides to keep it? Did they dive into stereotypical hyper-masculinity and laugh that *Oh man, you're screwed!* Did the one young woman in the office—cold as she was in terms of customer service—hear the news and think of the poor girl who was utterly fucked, now; or did she think I deserved it for willingly engaging in a relationship with an older man such as her irresponsible co-worker?

Mom entered my bedroom and took my hand, guided me toward the rose-patterned bedspread matching the pink walls of the bedroom that had once been my sister's—a visually bright setting for what felt like my darkest moment. I stared at our feet as we sat on my unmade bed, Mom's arm around me, and she described what happens next. My phone lit up in my lap with his name, and I was sure she had seen it before I had the chance to point the screen downward and refuse his call.

My phone rang again, but my distraught fear had turned angry. Once Mom was gone I replied, because I suddenly had much to say. My thumbs sped over the screen and I watched through teary eyes as the words came out, one text message after another, something along the lines of: this is your fault, you talked me into it, you should have known better, you're the adult...

You're right. He answered, if that's how you feel, I'll leave you alone.

My speeding fingers stopped when I saw his response. *That's not what's supposed to happen*, I thought. My chest was sinking further as it was weighted further with regret: for saying the wrong thing, driving him away. My pounding heart was echoing in my ears, my breathing and crying slowed from panicked to hurt as I processed it all. Since that morning I'd gone from college student to child-bearer, within thirty minutes I'd been frightened, helpless, lost, hysterical, angry...*and now alone*, I thought.

I awoke the following morning vomiting uncontrollably, a symptom that hadn't presented itself before then. They only do the procedure Tuesdays, so I had to spend one week pregnant—or rather, one more week.

I tried to get back to my life as a post-secondary student in the final semester of her preuniversity degree: alone at my home in the suburbs, writing essays at the dining table, but stopping regularly to run to the bathroom and throw up. I didn't go into the city to school, didn't see any

friends or family. He didn't rush to my side, of course, after all I'd said to him; all I had his last words to me, just below the surface of my mind: *If that's how you feel...*

May 26, 2015

"Why were you prescribed the pill?" The nurse-practitioner asked. I thought that was a strange question, as I sat in front of her being admitted for an abortion. I'd started the process at home: filled a prescription at the pharmacy with written instructions to "insert vaginally on morning of procedure"—a sentence, and an action, that I would never forget.

"The interaction with your anticonvulsants makes the pill nearly ineffective." The nurse continued. I stared at her with my mouth open, shocked at the walk-in clinic doctor's negligence. It might have given me an out, except once I did the math I discovered that I'd only started the pill after I was already pregnant. So, there was no one else to blame, no medical practice to sue... still just my own negligence.

The first young woman came out aided by a nurse, who sat her in the recliner across from mine. She had a dazed, gentle smile on her face as she bunched up the blankets under her chin, and fell asleep—never losing that drugged half-smile. At one point she took a call on her cellphone, from what I could hear it was a boyfriend awaiting an update. She talked to him in a slow, quiet voice, even laughing slightly... to look at her out of context, you would think she was simply tipsy. The next two were nearly identical in their process. I was fourth.

Inside a narrow, white-toned room, a single metal table coated in paper waited for me on the opposite wall, perpendicular to the door. At one end of the room was a small window letting in the sunlight, at the foot of the table was a wheeled stool, a tray of instruments, and stirrups. The doctor entered through a door at the far end of the room holding a chart, but if he introduced himself, I didn't hear. He sat immediately on the stool and lifted my gown.

I could feel the doctor: fingers touching and instruments inserted, but my view was blocked by my raised legs. I lay looking at the ceiling and the nurse's face as she small-talked and asked me questions about my life.

"Itchy, huh?" The nurse said with a smile, referring to the fact that my hand

kept unintentionally reaching up to scratch or rub my nose. She crinkled up her own nose in imitation.

“Yeah.” I forced a bit of a laugh, but it actually wasn’t itchy, just an awkward nervous tick I’d apparently acquired since the waiting room.

A sudden pain radiated from my abdomen, so sharp it made me jump; I felt a shiver consume my body, my jaw clenched, and my upper body moved instinctively.

“Whoa—it’s okay,” She took one of my hands and I squeezed it, while she sang shushes and endearments during my short, panicked breaths.

She continued the small-talk with questions about school, and I was caught off-guard by the sight of the doctor, poking his head above the tent that was my gown stretched across my raised knees, to casually contribute to the topic of university education. The nurse and him laughed, but I hadn’t even registered what he said before he’d hunched back to his position under the gown. Here I lay racked with guilt and fear, it was the biggest moment of my early adult life... while for the doctor, this process—one woman after another, practicing her reproductive rights—is so normalized that he can look up from his task of terminating pregnancies to make a casual remark about academia.

“Okay,” the nurse said, “Now you’ll sit up. But don’t look at your feet, or you’ll fall over.”

I sat like a groggy child on the edge of the bed, and did peek down at the nurse crouching in front of me, but she caught me—“Don’t look down!” she said again, so I kept my head straight while she dressed me. We’d been instructed to bring a pair of cotton underwear, with a heavy-flow pad already stuck inside, sealed in a Ziplock. It was recommended that we have a few such pairs at the ready for the days of bleeding to come, so Mom had bought me a pack of full-coverage underwear in pink and purple patterns with a white waistband, from WalMart.

The nurse positioned my feet, then had me hold onto her shoulders as we stood up together and she pulled the diaper-like underwear up my legs. By the time I was standing, the doctor and any evidence of what he’d done was gone, back through the door from which he’d entered, and I wouldn’t

see him again.

I didn't collapse into peaceful slumber like the first few women did. Instead I sat, awake but delirious, in reserved tears from the pain and the process, writhing with each wave of cramping. Only one other girl cried. She buried her face in the hospital blankets when she sat down; whether she was upset over the pregnancy, the pain, or the decision, I'll never know. The others came out looking dazed and relieved. At first, I judged them, as if they were taking it too lightly, and then I was envious. I wished I could have gone in and out with a smile, a casual phone call to my supportive boyfriend to tell him with relief: *We're free, it's just you and me again, this went how I wanted it to.*

I had never fallen asleep by the time it was my turn to receive my discharge instructions, just cried quietly over the uncontrollable cramping, curled up in the recliner with my muscles tensed, biting down on the blankets during the worst ones.

"You don't look so good." The nurse said, pausing her speech. She left to speak with the doctor, and returned with a pill for me to take. I was brought back to the recliner, and I would wake up another hour later, when all the other patients were gone.

During her almost three-hour wait, one of my older sisters had called Mom to ask if we could pick her up at the bus station.

"Is that okay with you?" Mom asked from the driver's seat, I saw her turn toward me so I nodded slowly, without looking at her.

"What were you guys doing out today?" my sister asked from the backseat when she'd finished updating us. She wanted to come home for the weekend because she was upset over a break-up with a boy who, in the long run, would end up being insignificant.

I felt my heart jump and my eyes shoot to the side to see Mom look at me again, and she said aloud: "Can I tell her?"

Well, there's no way to avoid it, now. I thought. I nodded again and squeezed my eyes shut, sending tears down my cheeks.

“Mollie terminated a pregnancy this morning.” Mom said matter-of-factly.

I heard a gasp from the seat behind me, in the rear-view mirror I saw her raise a hand to her mouth. For a second, I got angry with what seemed to be my older sister stifling a laugh; taking in gossip, passing a judgement... until I heard a snuffle, and saw that she had burst into tears.

It’s done. I texted him.

How did it go?

It was the most painful thing I’ve ever gone through. I said, without exaggeration.

I’m sorry you had to go through that. He answered, and that was it.

My sister and I would spend the afternoon in Mom’s bed, each of us crying over our respective losses, the TV playing day-time talk-shows in the background, with Mom coming and going to offer emotional support, bringing meals, and painkillers.

When I recounted the details, my sister discredited me by saying the past week of discomfort must have been all in my head, since I didn’t get the morning sickness until after I saw the positive test. It was the opposite, though: before I knew I was still in control, still had enough power to suppress it—once I knew the truth, everything was different. My body now belonged to this thing inside me: for weeks I’d unknowingly been harboring it, protecting it, feeding it, growing it... this thing inside me that shared DNA with a man twenty years my senior, whom I’d dated barely four months; this thing that had the power to change my life forever. Even once it was gone, my body would never be the same again; I would never be the same again.

We Remember Things From a High Place

TA Bower

ESSAY

I know the rhythms of the approaching trolley, its wheels sway from a half waltz at the curve and then bang out a heavy dirge as it sways and slows. I wait for it at the end of the platform where the brakes will start to keen in harmony with the wail of hopelessness that fills my lungs. This is my twenty-year old self and I watch her from a high place. My back was turned to the row houses, the kind where children pounded lessons on an upright piano in the front parlor. Now it serves as a doctor's office, where I have just been diagnosed as pregnant. In 1966, an unwed mother's home was the only solution for unwanted impregnation. Birth control and health insurance were barricaded by laws wrapped in staccato hymns of piety meant to sustain us through rape, homelessness, and longing for a moment of love.

It was the year after I vowed never to return to what should have been a family. Things were better, finally. The fourth-floor view of rats pacing up the alley a block from the old Boston City Hospital was replaced by an apartment where I could walk to my job typing at MIT. Over two months stood between me and Oliver, the hapless poet whom I followed to Boston. The nights of choosing either a small bag of chips or a coke were over.

Although my insides were wooden, I backed away from the rails, away from the front of the trolley just a step away. Through the years I have tried to understand the roots of that immediate suicidal compulsion. It was a simplistic calling. If I were forced to be a mother, I would have to die. Mother of Hard Slaps, the imprint of her hand as the Jergens almond scented lotion smeared across my cheek. Mother of Threats falling out of her mouth into the tub of dinner dishes, the hot water seizing out of the faucet. There was no way to be a mother that was not about drowning in coldness even though the iron slammed steaming each day against my father's army shirts.

My roommate found the underground phone number of the doctor in Agua Priete, Mexico and loaned me the money. I took a cheap student flight to Tucson and then a cab across the border, because I would not be my mother to an innocent. Ever.

When I was back on the plane, I felt something between my legs. In the bathroom I pulled out bloody gauze. At that moment I would have done anything to hold onto the Mother of Wishes even knowing she would brush me away as she would sweep the anole lizards off the porch of the house. Perhaps it never goes away nor fades with history or reason, that primordial longing for sheltering care in the moment of fear. No matter how I tried she was still Mother of Betrayals who gave her first born away to her pedophile father, the one who gripped my hands while he unzipped his fly.

I collected reasons for her sadism and kept them in an old cigar box. Her piano was sold when she was ten as the great recession came to steal her hope for even a new winter dress. She landed in the pile of war brides who were left to work in department stores, eat collard greens and beans, and save money for the day he would love her at war's end. Instead, my father choked her off even from the warmth of slim fantasies, ignoring her as she delivered children and cooked for a widower and his son, because my father quit the job that did not honor him as brave and special.

I watched her age at the piano. By the end, all traces of the Chopin's waltzes were lost as she set her fingering for each chord, slowly working through a page as the metronome ticked off a timing that no longer had a meaning. She had disappeared before I could find our finale. We were two figurines on a music box twirling separately at the same distance as the key unwound, the simple tune slowed, and then stopped.

In the Mexican clinic, I did not understand the terms of the abortion until I lay naked with the doctor over me. As he inserted his fingers, he began to massage me. I looked at him with no words, but terror, a rabbit grabbed out of a trap by its ears catches sight of the hatchet. He says, yes go ahead and have the orgasm, it will help loosen your cervix. For the rest of my life no one can hover above me when I am lying down.

I saw myself, after that moment, only as the rabbit. I told no one. But there is another story that has emerged, one that I first heard from Ellen Bass, poet and co- author of *The Courage to Heal*. To an audience of survivors of sexual abuse, therapists, and allies, she told a story about her brush with a predator. When she was a pre-teen, Ellen's family moved from an apartment over the store they owned into their first suburban house. As the house had a lawn, one of the store workers was hired to mow the lawn.

The man knocked on the door and Ellen opened it. He announced that he was done mowing and then leaning towards her, asked for a kiss. Ellen interrupted the story to explain that her experience was very different than most survivors, noting that the first thing she did, was to tell her mother. Ellen's mother immediately fired the man and told him that he was never to come near her daughter. She added stipulations and threats—if he saw Ellen on the street, he was to turn and go the other way or she would press charges. I was not alone in feeling stunned because I had never heard a story where a daughter was confident that her mother would protect her. Ellen concluded that segment of her talk by describing her mother as a lioness. It was then that I understood that surviving abuse and neglect was difficult but growing up bereft of someone to stand for you and with you, was a profound grief in my life.

The idea of the lioness stayed with me. I recognized it in my actions as I stood in the door blocking the unauthorized visit of a man whose girlfriend, pregnant and being treated for her addiction, was in our care. He carried flowers and asked for her. I refused in some way that communicated that he would have to crumple my body to enter the building. At the beach I watched the perimeter around my eleven-year-old niece as she swam in the ocean. When a man moved towards her, that invisible adrenaline bubbled up and then subsided when he walked away. I checked with strong women friends who had no lioness for themselves as children. Each was a fierce protector to those in her care—meaning the lioness is innate and does not require a tutor or mentor or even a mother. We talk in our circles about the challenge of practicing for oneself that which is natural to do for others.

When do we see the rivers that our lives have taken or notice the floods rushing to fill in the places that were once safe still leaving sanctuaries in its midst? On that day on the platform, I did not step in front of the trolley. The lioness of survival protected the soul of my being. I was not brave, yet I fought by finding the abortion. Although the price was very high, it was the right decision. We remember things from a high place, and then we see the courage.

When Are You Gonna Call Me

Gabby Raymond

POEM

I'm halfway to throwing my teapot out the window
And waiting for the right gale to follow it
On the way down I'll find the only married man I know in this city and see
if he's still married

Fuck earl grey and cardamom I want to bang
Into downstairs windows and see what they're doing in there
Jump back into the rain and the wind and
Delete my call log with every voice mail I've ever saved from
the man who dumped me for Jesus
and then I'll call and ask for his wife

And then call the man who gaslit me into thinking I was clingy for not
knowing he was in love with my friend
Then call the woman who told me I was fat in the basement of her
parents' house
Then call the man who bought me a tennis bracelet but still made me pay
for his meals, and ask
Do you have my money yet?

And then I'll call the man who got me pregnant and ask if he ever thinks
about our baby

And when I hit the ground I'll take the biggest breath I've taken all day
and I'll still be thinking about you

A Bit of Trouble

Louise Novotny

MEMOIR EXCERPT

Any names that appear in this piece have been changed to protect privacy.

My dorm room was as far away from the bathroom and showers as possible, so I had to hoof it down the hall that morning, not wanting to retch on the linoleum tiled hallway. I burst into the bathroom, slapped my hand onto the grim-gray door of the nearest stall, dropped to my knees in front of the toilet and bent my head inward just in time to vomit out whatever had been churning in my stomach. I flushed the wretchedness and, still clinging to the cool porcelain, wondered what was going on. I hadn't been drinking the night before, so it wasn't a hangover.

This all happened fifty years ago. I was a sophomore in college, 19 years old. I fancied myself among the wave of young women forging alternative roles for our future selves, delaying marriage, keeping family names if we did marry, putting off raising children, adopting the title Ms. rather than Miss or Mrs. To my dismay, at such a transformative time, which included an increasing number of co-ed campus housing options, I found myself assigned to an all-women's dorm in which a small cadre of residents adhered to a more traditional code of behavior than the ascending tide of "women's lib." This group assumed responsibility for upholding stricter—or what I would have called uptight—standards for the residents of our dorm. While many of us were exploring sexuality as part of our liberation, this little clique held that non-marital sex was a no-no and shaming was a tactic to uphold their code. One of them found me in the bathroom.

"Ah, it's you," her voice oozed judgment and condescension. "Sounds like you're in a bit of trouble." She seemed to stand guard at the open stall door with a view of my heaving backside. I had run across her before. A few nights earlier, she saw me in a sizzling embrace with my boyfriend and waited for me in the dorm lobby. She huddled with her comrades at the reception desk so they could bear witness as she hurled a not very original taunt my way: "Why don't you get a room." I ignored her. I was floating on a cloud of young love having spent the evening with Clay.

Clay and I had met in high school in suburban Washington, DC and

developed an intimate relationship in our senior year. After high school, Clay enrolled in a local community college not far from the state university I attended. We continued an off-again-on-again romance that, at the time I am writing about, was on again, full throttle. We were in love and talked of a future together. At the same time we each plotted paths in pursuit of our own future dreams. That was my truth, fifty years ago.

It turned out my nosey dorm mate was right. I was in trouble. I was stunned when the test taken at the college health clinic came back positive. So stunned, the advice offered to me by the clinic nurse sounded like glugs and wah-wahs submerged in the flood of thoughts that rushed through my head. I knew how babies were made. I had watched the movie in my high school biology class. My mother described the facts of life to me. I understood that risky behavior could result in pregnancy. I'm not sure why I didn't think it could happen to me. Suddenly, I had a new truth.

It was 1971, the campus health service was just coming to terms with the sexual revolution taking place among students like Clay and me who, by and large, had been taught little about reproductive health and birth control which, at the time, was not legal outside of a marriage.

Usually, Clay and I used rhythm with condoms or withdrawal. I didn't understand that the rhythm method works best if one's menstrual cycle is regular. Mine wasn't. Nor did I understand that withdrawal could be undermined by leaks or drips. As a result, there were occasions when Clay and I had unprotected sex.

I left the clinic feeling I was on my own. I cringed at the thought of the dorm virginity guard gloating over the lurid news of my fall from grace. Shattered and ashamed, I remembered the whispers and snickers when a high school friend got pregnant.

Marlene was a free spirit, a flower child. And she was just sixteen. She had a mad crush on the rock musician who fathered her baby, but she had never given a thought to marriage, much less motherhood. She did not want the baby, but she had no choice. Her parents chose for her, demanding she have the baby and in wedlock.

Marlene continued to attend school and to live in her parent's home after her marriage, but as her bump expanded, the whispers and snickers in the

school and in the neighborhood multiplied. Some people were titillated by Marlene's rebelliousness – that she was having sex at 16 was radical, exciting. Others called her a slut.

Soon after Marlene turned 18, when the child was about 18 months, Marlene split, leaving the baby behind. She took off for the Virgin Islands (ironically), living in a tent on a beach. Her parents ended up with custody of the baby.

Marlene's misguided marriage and the unwanted birth were not a model I wanted to emulate. Confused about what to do, I turned to Clay. Since we created this predicament together, I expected we would find a way out of it together.

Clay wasn't much help. He expressed disbelief: are you sure? He stammered as he tried to grasp the news, "What do you m-mean? when was your last p-period?" The he tried to sort out his responsibility, backpedaling furiously, "Weren't you using birth control?" The poised, confident young man I had fallen in love with vanished, and in his place was a bumbling boy, caught in the act, struggling with excuses, looking to shift blame. Disappointed, I asked to meet soon in person. "There's so much going on," Clay said. "Maybe in a couple of days I can come to see you."

I waited, simmering in a stew of anxiety and mortification. The more time I spent alone with my thoughts, the more my apprehension magnified. Giving birth was not a consideration. Not after Marlene's experience. Not after the response from Clay. Not in my wildest dreams.

In Maryland, where my family lived and where I went to college, abortion was permitted in only limited circumstances. The thought of an illegal abortion frightened me. Images of dark alleys and rusty hangers kept me awake at night. The issue of how I was to pay for the procedure also kept me sleepless. I was unable to eat, but my innards still writhed with morning sickness.

I'm not sure how many days passed when I eventually told my mother. The two of us often clashed, so I dreaded approaching her. I felt she was controlling and meddlesome. She felt I didn't take life or myself seriously enough. "Who do you think you are, Alice in Wonderland?" she chastised me once. I, rebellious child, took her rebuke as a badge of honor. In this

instance, I hesitated to show her that she may have been right.

My memory of the conversation with my mother is fuzzy. I do know that there was no reproof. As I told her my story, I felt her disappointment for me, not in me. I don't think there was much discussion about whether I wanted to give birth or to raise a child; my recollection is that she agreed readily with me that it was not the time for me to have a baby.

Mom bolted into action, as though she were on a mission to protect her own child. Her years of nursing kicked in and I welcomed her methodical approach to solving my dilemma. The first thing she instructed was to not to tell anyone about the pregnancy or the abortion. When I allowed that I had told Clay, she suggested I tell him that the test was a false-positive. I did as she suggested. Clay was enormously relieved but also peeved at the needless anxiety I had put him through. Not the best reaction, from my point of view, since I was unburdening him of any responsibility for the actual pregnancy. I felt duplicitous, lying to him, but I had turned myself over to my higher power, my mother. She bolted into action, making calls to determine that I could get an abortion in nearby Washington, D.C. and scheduling an appointment for me at the Planned Parenthood clinic there.

Mom accompanied me to the clinic, and she insisted that we look proud for the occasion. She wore a suit with jacket, skirt and pull-over sweater in a monochrome of turquoise. I chose a dress in a humbling shade of brown. My mother's insistence on appropriate attire seemed a façade to project that there was nothing to be ashamed of, but that wasn't how I felt. In spite of her unwavering support, I floundered in a sea of guilt and remorse. I felt like a frightened and forlorn character in one of those movies from high school designed to keep us fearful of sex and sexuality; the liberated woman of the 1970s I aspired to be had withered.

After an exam to confirm the pregnancy, I was ushered into an office for a consultation with a psychiatric social worker. Her concerned eyes and soothing voice comforted me in this extremely uncomfortable situation. She asked me a few simple, though personal, questions: how was I feeling; did I know the father; was I in touch with him. Then the questions elevated to a more clinical level: did I understand what it means to be pregnant; did I know what stage I was in; was I sure I wanted to terminate the pregnancy.

Next, she asked me why I wanted an abortion. I was not prepared for that

question. The answer seemed obvious – I was young and inexperienced and in no way prepared for motherhood. She looked at me, her eyes imploring a more thoughtful response. I stared back at her, befuddled. I had been following the path my mother had cleared for me and expected to be relieved of an unintended and unwanted pregnancy at the end of that path. I didn't realize I would have to justify my decision, any more than someone diagnosed with high cholesterol would have to explain their choice of medication rather than a lifestyle changing diet, or a cancer patient when faced with two different protocols to treat her condition would have to rationalize her choice of one instead of the other.

I didn't challenge the question. Instead, I muttered some reasons: my boyfriend and I were careless, but we were not ready for marriage and certainly not prepared to raise a child. Her eyes tried to coax more enlightenment from me, so I blathered on: he was planning to move to another city; I was going to finish college and then move to be with him; or maybe I would go to graduate school. Words skittered clumsily out of my mouth. Tears splashed down my cheeks as I felt forced to explain why a child could not fit into my life plans, why there was just no way the two of us could provide a nurturing environment for a child. My words sounded selfish to my own ears, silly and immature.

The social worker interrupted my rambling. "Do you think you will have mental health difficulties if you go through with the birth?" she asked while her eyes transmitted a pointed message to me. "Yes," I got the message. The law in D.C. allowed abortion if the pregnancy posed a threat to the woman's life or health, including mental health.

I responded slowly, "I think if I have this baby, I will probably fall into a deep depression." The social worker patted my shoulder and said, "that's fine." I had uttered the magic words that would allow me to terminate the pregnancy. I looked at her, my wet face still wearing its befuddled expression and wondered if that is what they wanted from me—shame, remorse, vulnerability—before I would be granted agency over my own body.

Today I still feel I made the right decision. Had I gone through with the birth, many of the pathways that I ended up taking in my life would have been restricted or even cut-off. Clay's life, too, would have been upended had I demanded marriage or some sort of accountability from him.

It is hard to imagine that any of the three of us would have thrived.

The simple truth is, I was a careless 19-year-old; a healthy young woman in love with a healthy young man, who was also careless. In the throes of passion, we had unprotected sex at a time when sex education was cursory and access to effective contraceptives for young adults like us was difficult.

Some version of my story will be repeated again and again, no doubt, and so I hope future careless young lovers will have access to reproductive health education and affordable birth control, knowledgeable and helpful support from their partner and family, and access to safe and affordable abortion should all else fail them.

Untitled Fertility Essay

Melissa Gruntkosky

ESSAY EXCERPT

I was on the cusp of my 37th birthday when I decided not to renew my birth control prescription. I was getting older, and my soon-to-be husband and I were pondering whether we wanted children. It was a discussion we'd been having for several years with no confident decision one way or the other as we focused on our careers, traveling, and creative pursuits. But we knew a choice needed to be made before it was too late. We were about to get married in a few months and a child seemed like a logical next step. So, we agreed that instead of renewing my prescription, I'd stop taking the pill and we'd "see what happens."

For several months nothing did, nor did I expect it to. We got married and went on our honeymoon. We didn't track my cycles or perform any tricks like elevating my legs after sex for better chances. I didn't know those were a thing yet. I knew that many women struggled with trying to conceive at my age and accepted it might not happen right away, if at all. Not to mention I'd been on the pill for my entire adult life. I wasn't perfect at taking it, yet I'd never been pregnant before.

Needless to say, we were shocked when, less than 6 months after stopping the pill, there was a positive result on a home pregnancy test almost instantly after I peed on the stick. Pregnant. Without much effort. At age 37. It felt unreal. I took another test just a few moments later to make sure. Again, the words "pregnant" appeared on the digital window within seconds. This was the real deal.

At first, I experienced all the right symptoms: sore nipples, fatigue, and plenty of food aversions. This boosted our confidence enough that at only six weeks along we told my family at my sister-in-law's birthday celebration. They stood for a family photo but instead I was taking a video. "We're pregnant" we said, and I got their shocked looks captured on camera. We told my husband's family soon after. Then I texted my close friends a picture of my positive pregnancy test. I even spilled the beans to some of my colleagues at work. Around seven weeks I got nervous when I started spotting but after a quick Google search, I convinced myself it was normal and didn't question when some of my pregnancy symptoms began to

decrease. It didn't occur to me to contact a doctor. I figured I was lucky not to be experiencing worse morning sickness.

It wasn't until 10 weeks when we had our first doctor's appointment, which is standard procedure for a first pregnancy. We met with a midwife who was bubbly and reciprocated our enthusiasm with smiles and hand gestures. She didn't show a hint of concern when I told her about the spotting and decreased symptoms. Everything felt routine. When it was time for the ultrasound, she warned me that it might be cold and uncomfortable, apologizing that at this stage she still needed to do a transvaginal ultrasound to confirm the pregnancy. As she inserted the wand, she continued about how lucky I was that because of my geriatric pregnancy, though she doesn't like to use that term, I could get an ultrasound this early. Most of her patients were required to wait until 20 weeks before insurance will cover it.

Then she stopped talking.

After an awkward pause she told us she couldn't see a heartbeat. What she saw on screen only appeared to be 6 weeks developed. The pregnancy wasn't viable. I could choose a D&C or take a medication. I could also wait it out and miscarry naturally, but she advised against that since it could lead to sepsis. The choice was mine. If I opted for the D&C, she could get me in as soon as two days out.

The choice was mine. As I lay on the examination table, staring up at the recessed ceiling with my legs still spread apart, it didn't occur to me to cry, but I barely remembered to breathe. I'd never heard of a D&C before. I didn't know you could lose a pregnancy and not physically miscarry. What's sepsis? I managed to ask a few questions but didn't grasp the decision I was suddenly being forced to make. I'll take the D&C? I said with a question mark.

At the time, I didn't know that a D&C, or a dilation and curettage, is the medical term for an abortion. My Google searches informed me that it was a routine treatment for a missed miscarriage, which is when a fetus stops growing but your body doesn't recognize it and so, it remains. The alternative option was a medicated abortion using Misoprostol. Taking the medication meant I would induce a miscarriage at home. There was a very real possibility of lots of pain, blood and seeing everything in the toilet bowl. Some women bleed so much they end up in the hospital anyway.

I was confident that a D&C was the better choice for me.

The procedure couldn't happen fast enough, but I had to wait 2 days. The idea that there was a thing once alive and now dead inside me felt like something out of a horror movie. I wanted it out of me, now, and to get on with my life. I wanted to send out a group text to everyone and not have to mention it again. How could I be so stupid to tell so many people so early? It was finally clear why so many people keep their pregnancies quiet until after the first trimester. I wanted to erase all evidence that I was ever pregnant. I'd already deleted the video I took at my sister in law's birthday party and threw the positive pregnancy tests I saved in the trash. The procedure was the closure I needed.

I returned to work just a day after having the D&C to face my colleagues, who I told one by one that I missed work because I lost the pregnancy. The last thing I wanted to do was talk about such an intimate experience with people I barely knew. They tried to comfort me by reminding me it was super common. A few mentioned how they went on to have two beautiful children after experiencing their own miscarriage. But I didn't want to hear about any of that. I just wanted to be back in my bed binge watching The Great British Bake Off with a heating pad on my lap and forgetting about what happened. It was clear I should have taken more time off.

A few weeks later I attended a friend's wedding only to discover that both my friend and two other good friend's wives were pregnant. I was already aware that another friend couldn't make it because she just gave birth to her daughter. I'd also recently found out another friend was pregnant and due the same week of my original due date. So instead of getting closure, I was experiencing the phenomena that so many complain about when they have difficulties conceiving: everyone was pregnant and I was not. And there was a red-hot desire burning within me to change that as soon as possible.

Except, the problem was that my period didn't come back when they said it would. Nor did it come again the next month. Something wasn't right.

Sticking My Hands Down My Pants

Rachel Spekman

ESSAY

Glossary:

IUI: Intrauterine insemination (IUI) is a type of artificial insemination, specifically a procedure for treating infertility. Sperm that have been washed and concentrated are placed directly in your uterus around the time your ovary releases one or more eggs to be fertilized. The hoped-for outcome of intrauterine insemination is for the sperm to swim into the fallopian tube and fertilize a waiting egg, resulting in pregnancy. Depending on the reasons for infertility, IUI can be coordinated with your normal cycle or with fertility medications.

IVF: In vitro fertilization (IVF) is **a complex series of procedures used to help with fertility or prevent genetic problems and assist with the conception of a child.** During IVF, mature eggs are collected (retrieved) from ovaries and fertilized by sperm in a lab. The fertilized egg (embryo) is transferred into the uterus.

Source: Mayo Clinic

2013

We say “I do” in front of 120 amazing human beings we call our friends and family. The shores of the ambling, iridescent Sheepscot River on a lavender flower farm in Wiscasset, Maine. One white woman (me) with a short, opaque dress and bright blue sash and a black woman (Robin) with a champagne, shoulder-strapped dress float down the hay-covered aisle. The beer is cold. The flatbread gooey. The cupcakes sticky. The dance floor is hot. We whip each other around, busting out in a surprise, 9-song mashup choreographed wedding dance. We promise to love each other through whatever life throws us and to build a family together.

...

2014

We attend 3 webinars on sperm selection and the process, master new fertility terminology, and work on at least a dozen forms. I wait 8 months for a 2 minute appointment for a GI doctor to sign off that I don't need a colonoscopy because my brother had polyps when he was two years old.

We learn that:

- ◇ Because I am under 35, I will need to do 12 IUIs at the facility to be eligible to be considered for IVF.
- ◇ The majority of IUI pregnancies occur in the first three to four cycles of IUI so we shouldn't concern ourselves with that, but they just want us to know the process.
- ◇ This is what insurance covers in Mass and we are one of the most progressive states for fertility and reproductive rights.

Weekly, I wait on hold, on hold, on hold with:

- ◇ my primary care physician
- ◇ the fertility doctor
- ◇ the geneticist
- ◇ the sperm bank

We buy our first batch of sperm- 5 vials for the price of 4- a deal for building your family! Somehow, a year has passed between all of the doctor's appointments, the webinars, and the waiting.

We are ready to get started!

2015

IUI #1: a rush of excitement. 60 million sperm were just injected into my uterus! They must all be swimming and fighting to impregnate my egg. I visualize it like they showed us in the cartoons during the webinar: swimming forcefully and happily to achieve one mission. A swimmer myself, I smile at how natural this feels, sip tea in coffee shops, and skip along in anticipation waiting for the pregnancy test to reveal a smile after my 2-week wait.

The face frowns and the result is negative. I am sad, but nowhere near hopeless. Robin is disappointed, but remains optimistic.

IUI #2: Rinse and repeat of IUI #1.

IUI #3: Rinse and repeat of IUIs #1 and 2.

I lay atop a beige OB chair, coarse butcher block paper shreds my skin underneath me. I spread my mishaven legs, look up to the lifeless ceiling to count the holes to pass the time. The nurse arrives, opens plastic packages

of syringes and forceps. The antibacterial, acidic smells assault my nose as she washes each object thoroughly in the crystalline fluids. Each nurse oohs and aahs, especially after they acknowledge my chart.

“This one’s count is 78 million, 303 million, 95 million...these boys can’t wait to swim up and flirt with your uterus!”

“So I see it’s not your first rodeo, but I still want to explain how this will work. First...”

“You’re so brave and strong for getting back in there and fighting. Good for you.”

“Now, this will feel a little cold and you will feel a slight cramping. Ready to make a baby?”

IUI #4: Rinse and repeat of IUIs #1, 2, and 3.

IUI #5: Rinse and repeat of IUIs #1, 2, 3, and 4.

We select a new sperm donor. This time we decide to buy a batch of 3 vials. Money is tight and each vial runs about \$1,000 plus shipping, storing, cooling, pick-up and drop-off costs for a total of \$1,200 per vial. The process has become so routine: I monitor my ovulation timing with an app and a thermometer up my ass. I finally spike and then wait on hold for the fertility team to determine what day and time to come in. Robin picks up the massive tank from California Cryobank in Cambridge plastered in an oversized cardboard box with orange tape that reads “medical materials- do not expose contents and leave upright.” Robin shares that passengers stare at her, the box, the orange tape, and then shift uncomfortably in their seats and move away from the bomb-sized looking container. She transports it in a blanket and oversized IKEA bag from then on. We welcome the box into our home, delighted and cooing at it like a newborn making its miracle arrival. At bedtime, we place it in our bedroom closet, sing lullabies to it, and drift off wondering if it will one day take shape and form to become our actual baby.

IUI #6: Rinse and repeat of IUIs #1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

I notice my body starts tightening on the train to each monthly appointment.

It cools when I arrive and freezes entirely when they slide the catheter into my uterus and flood me with sperm. Tears fall as I stare at the ceiling, eek out a thank you, and wait. And wait. And wait.

IUI #7: In a desperate attempt to try something different, I reach out to an “at home midwife” whose background and credentials I do not check. It is Thanksgiving weekend 2016 and California Cryobank is closed the Friday after Thanksgiving- the peak day of my ovulation that month. I call the office and dial through to the emergency line, beg them through sobs to open the office for me. Unbelievably, they agree. We are hosting a Friendsgiving brunch and, with little fanfare, I abruptly announce that I’ll “be back in a minute” because I need to “run a quick errand.” A gray, bleak New England day greets me as I drive the 30 minutes from Dorchester to Cambridge and then back again. My friends greet me back upon my one hour errand, see my puffy cheeks, wet from crying, ask no questions, give me hugs, and depart. I clean the dishes, light blue ceramic plates, we picked out for our wedding registry and tears dance with the dish detergent.

Later, the “midwife” arrives and directs us to our bedroom in a no-nonsense manner. She tells me to spread my legs, announces that my “vagina is too pink” which is why I’m not getting pregnant and hands me a strict diet with herbal supplements and grains and meats to add and subtract each week of the month. I ask if there is research to back this protocol up. “It works. Trust me,” she responds, incredulous that I would even ask her that. Even though my vagina is too pink and I’m an emotional wreck who has not completed any part of the diet yet, we all agree to do the IUI because she is already there and I already picked up the sperm tank. After she is done, she instructs us to have sex so that I orgasm and to call her once I’ve done two months of the diet to schedule our next IUI. “This one probably won’t work, but I’m sure the next one will if you do everything on that sheet of paper.”

It doesn’t work.

I go to Whole Foods and buy \$400 worth of supplements, all kinds of rare meats, cheeses, and legumes.

I do the diet for two long months.

I decide to do my next IUI at the doctor’s office instead because the one at home didn’t count towards the finish line of 12 IUIs to be eligible for IVF.

IUI #8: Rinse and repeat of IUIs #1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

It doesn't work.

My fertility team can't figure out why I'm not getting pregnant. They change the protocol to add clomid and to do a timed trigger shot. I sign a waiver that I would be okay if the clomid resulted in multiple births.

IUI #9: Rinse and repeat of IUIs #1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 but with clomid and the trigger shot.

It doesn't work.

My fertility doctor calls me. "Look, they don't teach you emotions in med school, but I can imagine this must be hard and frustrating for you," she says as I sob on the other end of the line.

"Here's the good news. The state of Mass just changed its insurance regulations and now you only need 6 IUIs completed before you are eligible for IVF, so you are an overachiever and have more than qualified for IVF so I suggest we go there next. No more IUIs."

I exhale. Relief and dread swamping my body. My wife is not pro-IVF or Western medicine for that matter. I am ready to stop these fruitless, endless, sad IUIs. My vagina, my uterus, my heart, and our marriage has been through the ringer.

And it turns out it is only chapter one of our journey towards parenthood.

Everything We Do is Always Wrong

Paula Anderson

MEMOIR EXCERPT

My baby's arms are drawn up like a little T-Rex's. They're shaking. All of him is trembling in the bassinet. I am concerned that there is something very wrong with him. My epidural has worn off, so I can move my legs again, but I'm shaky myself so I don't dare pick him up without a spotter.

The baby is clearly miserable. So is the nurse who comes in and slaps a blue pamphlet next to the remains of my waffles. I shuffle over to see it. "When Your Baby is Born Addicted." The font is Arial, as if drug users only deserve the most basic of lettering.

So, what the fuck? Is this actually for me?

What is my baby addicted to? Have they confused my kid's blood with another's? I admit I took a hit off someone's joint in 1992. But I haven't partaken since, and it's 2011. As for harder drugs, I've never even seen cocaine in real life, just the movies. It's a white powder and if you dab some on your tongue you can tell how pure it is before you start shooting people.

"That's why he's shaking," Pamphlet Nurse says. She's disgusted with me. She has doubts about my fitness as a parent. It's like she can't believe that my only punishment is a pamphlet and not the seizure of my offspring by DCYF. While I'm sure I look the part of woman out-of-control, with my sweaty clown hair and threadbare johnny, I am filled with middle class outrage.

I already have two children at home and I had to earn my right to parent them. I passed home studies and FBI background checks. But I am smart enough by now not to let her know about my daughters or be difficult. Her superiority is a danger. I know how we white women can be—always looking for a reason to "do good" and enjoy that bit of power the system permits us. This is why I buy off the PTA with a check. Stalin has nothing on the ladies of the committee.

Pamphlet nurse delivers her lecture. It's not coke, or oxy, or even that terror of my 70s childhood, angel dust. It's Zolofit. The 25mg I was forbidden to

stop taking by both my louche obstetrician, Dr. McSkeevy, and my primary care doctor. And that midwife who looked like Baba Yaga. And the one nice nurse who I never saw after my first visit. And the doctor I liked who left the practice forcing me back with McSkeevy. They all warned me not to stop taking the Zoloft. Even the nosy pharmacist who didn't want to give me the antacids I needed to make sure little master fetus and I didn't wither away, and is probably denying some teenage girl Plan B at this very moment, didn't question that prescription.

But Pamphlet Nurse is looking for a fight. There's a rage there, and she has to be placated until I can get my kid out of this hospital. I nod passively, thinking unkind, retrograde thoughts about her weight, as she goes through the key points in the pamphlet and warns me about the terrible long-term effects. I might as well have been knocking back a few whiskeys every day, given what is going to happen to my poor boy.

Having been suitably shamed, Pamphlet Nurse departs, possibly disappointed in the lack of escalation.

I am relieved when my mother arrives a little while later. My mother is a nurse herself. It's important to have a witness in case Pamphlet Nurse returns, although I have yet to see the same nurse, doctor, or lactation consultant twice.

Mom goes for her grandson. He's a late in life surprise and she is excited to have a baby to squeeze again.

"Good God," she says, "It's freezing in here."

Is it? I'm so hot. Any part of me that isn't already secreting some sort of childbirth-related fluid is spangled with sweat. This body is desperate to be rid of 40 pounds of water it no longer needs.

We both look up. The air conditioning duct is directly over the baby. It's late June. I feel the air but not the cold.

My mother huffs. She swaddles the baby, hands him to me, and then wheels the bassinet away from the blast.

It's a miracle! Drug addiction cured. The baby stops shivering.

How to Write an Essay about Your Stillborn Child

Andrea Meyer, *Your Body, Your Story Instructor*

ESSAY

Wake up too early, head full of muck.

Try to fall back to sleep.

Stretch your legs far out over the expanse of bed your husband vacated to feed the cats.

Imagine diving deep into the darkness.

Make an alphabetical list of movies in your head to trick your brain into sleep. *Alien. Black Hawk Down. Carnal Knowledge. Days of Being Wild. Elephant. Fire of Love. Girl Interrupted*—

Open your eyes again and focus on the speckled grey of the ceiling in the still-dark room.

Remember apropos of nothing that your baby died. It happened 12 years ago, but sometimes the memory still nudges you in the hazy light before the sun peeks through the blinds. Okay, not really apropos of nothing.

Remember you're supposed to write an essay. About Nina, the baby you lost in your 35th week of pregnancy 12 years ago. (God, she would have been 12, 13 in April. Your breath goes ragged.)

Inventory the other essays. The first right afterwards, when you refused to believe she was gone, when you still thought you could fix it, when you raged at the heavens and felt like a walking fucking tragedy and struggled to move on, failing, loving her so hard you thought you would break, this baby you didn't even know if you wanted. You wrote about the annual ritual you, your husband, and son perform on her birthday. You write letters to her, read them aloud, crying on a beach or other beautiful place.

Sometimes you build an altar in the sand with stones and feathers. You used to let go of balloons but stopped when you learned it was an environmental hazard. You wrote about Meghan Markle's miscarriage. You wrote for

Elle.com about your indecision about having another child. You were 41 when you lost her. Your husband thought you were too fragile to try again. You desperately wanted another baby. You wanted to get pregnant immediately, sleep through the next ten months, and wake up with a perfect, healthy newborn in your arms. The fantasy being nothing like the messy reality of conceiving and carrying a baby, you dreaded failure or, even worse, losing another child. You couldn't decide. You talked about it nonstop, to each other, to friends, to a string of therapists. You journaled till your fingers hurt. Time passed. Not deciding became a half-assed, sort of, almost decision. You had unprotected sex, once, and were so relieved to get your period, you thought it was a sign. You were full of shit. Maybe that essay was full of shit, the ambivalence that slipped into resignation fluffed up to look like gratitude, like being okay with something that was not okay.

Kick off the covers, determined to pull yourself together.

Pull the covers back over yourself. Wrap yourself in them like a cocoon.

Snatch another memory from the stale air around you. An old friend who found you on Facebook a couple years later said after she miscarried, someone told her to have another baby right away. "It was the only way to fill the hole." Red hot anger shot through you at the time. It sputters and sparks even now. Shocking how your emotions around this baby, this loss, the decision you never quite made still live so close to the surface. Why would she tell you this? More crucially, why didn't anyone give you this advice? Everyone was so cautious. They didn't know what to say. Your midwife said if you wanted to try again, you'd better get on it, but no one came out and said: Do it, or you'll regret it. Would it have filled the hole? This is the question that gnaws you.

Let your mind wander to a woman in your support group who had another baby right away. Afterwards she faced health issues. Her doctor said having yet another could be life-threatening. She had one anyway. She didn't die. You understand wanting more and more and more babies, trying to fill the hole. You wish you'd been as brave as she was. As stupid. As certain. You wish your son had a sibling. You imagine the chaos and joy a new child would have brought to your home, to your life. Chaos and joy would have distracted you from the hole.

Grab another thought that is hovering just outside your consciousness.

At this point you're not going back to sleep. The essay isn't going to write itself. You remember lunch with friends just days before the night you noticed she wasn't moving. At a Mexican place in Harvard Square, you felt a fizzy unfamiliar brand of heartburn. (Was she already dead? Was she dying?) After lunch, you ran into a friend of a friend you'd hit it off with at a party. You suggested grabbing coffee sometime. "Let's get margaritas," she said, gesturing toward your massive belly. "That baby is cooked!" Everyone laughed.

Clear your mind.

Try unsuccessfully to avoid hearing the echo of your husband's voice saying, "This is the saddest I've ever felt," the image of him holding your daughter's lifeless body in his arms as he says it.

Calm your breath.

Close your eyes. Breathe in, breathe out.

Think of things you are grateful for. Your soft bed. A roof overhead. Electricity to keep you warm in winter. The capacity to feel deep emotion. Your son. Unimaginable you could ever love anyone as much as your son. If Nina had lived, your heart would have expanded to include her. Breathe deeply and feel immense gratitude for your son. Your perfect son. He is alive, so alive.

Put your feet on the floor. Feel it solid beneath you.

Pull on a sweatshirt.

Go downstairs to start your day. You will drink a glass of water. You have an essay to write.

Breaking Down

Sabina Brennan

ESSAY

I was a college student when I had my abortion. I was not raped, or molested. I didn't already have 3 children, or an abusive boyfriend, I wasn't poor. It was three years after *Roe vs Wade*.

...

My sisters had both been sent to a small catholic college- and both bailed within a term. I was sent to Purdue. I had wanted to go to UW – Madison, but my parents were dead set against it: Madison was a radical school. It was the mid – seventies, and my vision of college was marches and demonstrations – and changing the world.

I arrived at Purdue with a subscription to MS magazine, courtesy of my sister Maureen. I shaved the dark brown hair on my legs, but I considered letting it grow, much to the horror of some of my sorority bound dorm mates. As an environmental science student at Purdue, I found no environmental classes for undergrads. I took organic chemistry – twice. Professor Fuchs (his name!) extolled the value of DDT, and lamented that it was banned. How could I learn anything from this dinosaur? My parents sent me to Purdue to straighten out – it was not working, but nothing was, really.

By my sophomore year, my twenty year-old response was to listen to Pink Floyd, smoke pot and just about flunk out. I was burnt out. I tried speed. I decided to lose my virginity. One of my roommates, Harmony, was sexually active with men and women. One night she propositioned me, but I knew she had taken acid: I declined. But one of her boyfriend's friends hung out at our apartment, he had really long hair and was a lot of fun. We hit it off. Harmony was rooting for me. Rick and I had sex three or four times: This wasn't love, it was sexual exploration.

As I left Purdue for summer break, my period was late. Week after week, no period. Not even a smidge of blood on my panties. Days went by, I prayed – seriously bargaining with God. That Queen song "Sometimes I wish I'd never been born at all" was mine.

I finally snuck over to a place that gave me a pregnancy test.

It was 1976, and for the bicentennial we were given the “permission” to be creative and paint the fire hydrants Red, White and Blue. I was watching for my period- every day, every time I went to the bathroom. Disappointed, fearful. Smoking lots of dope – and listening to Pink Floyd, King Crimson – 20th Century Schizoid Man. I prayed – I’d been taught to pray, and that God would answer my prayers. So I prayed and prayed – still nothing. No easy resolution or absolution.

I had a touch of morning sickness and my dad noticed, but I said I’d eaten something that disagreed with me.

I had to sneak to call Rick in Texas, and I was so afraid that I would be heard. He promised to send me half the money I needed and a bag of pot. Neither arrived. I was depressed, and terrified that my parents would find out. Terrified what it would do to my life if I had a child at 20. Terrified that the baby would have a birth defect from the speed I had taken. I believed that I could never count on any man to be with me throughout the life of a child. Would I have to live with my parents? Marry Rick? Quit college and work in a restaurant? Give up on my dreams to change the world? I didn’t know anyone who was a single parent, and as an environmentalist, I strongly believed in limiting population, and maternal feelings never arose, never overcame the terror I felt.

That summer was the closest I’ve ever come to taking my life. I had a lot of reasons to choose abortion – and I’m glad I did, because I was way too young, way too messed up.

I told my sister, and my high school friends, Nellie, and Cyndi. Cyndi was my rich friend, her dad flew her to NY for her abortion when she was about 16, before abortion was even legal in Illinois. Who knew? I sure hadn’t. I knew nothing really, about birth control. I don’t think I “believed” in the rhythm method, but I suppose I hoped I’d have some luck, and not get pregnant the first week I had sex with a man. We had no sex education that talked about birth control. No one ever taught me to protect myself.

I finally took matters into my own hands- I asked for help, I asked for this fetus to be gone – and I wasn’t asking god anymore, there was no use in it.

My sister Maureen sent me the two hundred dollars for an abortion. I mourn now for the women who risk arrest – and huge costs for choosing abortion. And the lost lives of women who will die – and the forever changed lives of those women who are being forced to bear children.

Cyndi accompanied me downtown on the train to a big abortion mill in Chicago's loop. I walked in, and registered (under whose name?). It was big, impersonal and frightening, with lots of women, sitting in folding chairs, waiting our turns silently. I went from room to room waiting – waiting till someone confirmed that it really wasn't 13 weeks, it was 12 – and legal. It hurt like the worst period I've ever had. I was so glad to get out of there – and so relieved.

Riding the train, going home, I was fearful my mom would find out! I'd just spent the day downtown with my friend, nothing more. We went to the Chicago Art Museum and Marshall Fields. Just a standard day – that changed my life.

My best friend Nellie, asked me if it was a boy or a girl. I was devastated, didn't know how to answer, but I knew I was horrified and alone. She became pregnant and had her own abortion a few years later, and apologized. Later, I learned another plaid wearing classmate also had an abortion. We were four women, we had been classmates since grade school. We were raised strictly Catholic, and we all broke with that religion to care for ourselves. We were four women, learning we could own our own lives, we would not be ruled by biology.

Rabid

Cleo Frances Kidd

POEM

For a year after conception,
I searched for anyone with answers.
I traveled daily
with desperate questions
and held on tight.
Who are you?,
I needed to know.
Who would you have been?
I set my jaw to that one.
Do you exist?
and when can I stop crying for you in secret, no longer on my mother's lap?
Your absence is inconspicuous,
your absence is ghostly,
your absence is
your absence is...
But,
with only savage and desperate words for grief at my disposal, I kept quiet.

Red State (of Mind)

Kelly Russell

POEM

When my much younger sister, almost 25, tells me she wants to move to Texas
in our bi weekly ish zoom call, I laugh out loud.
Inside, my heart pounds and I see red.
I didn't think it could get worse than it already was. I was wrong.

Let me backtrack a little.
This isn't our first rodeo with moving.
Originally from Boston, she is calling from Flori-Duh or DeSantis-Land as I
unaffectionately call it
When she first let it slip that she was moving to Miami two years ago
My heart skipped several beats
For different reasons then of course.

She tells me that Austin
Is calling her name,
The city, not the boy she was seeing.
What calls her to this Red(der) state, I don't know
My heart beats so fast in my chest, it rattles my soul.

Immediately I tell her, "You can't move to Gilead,
You are just the right age for taking.
My thoughts racing, thinking of dystopian books, too close to home tv
shows, and recent legal
changes in the country we call home (of the free, sort of).

In my palpitation rattled mind, I imagine Greg Abbott's photo,
On the wall in her obgyn's office.
Red cloaks in the closet,
The only prescription available to her.

She is white but she is not rich
She has red hair but emerald won't be the color of her clothing in Gilead.
There will be no crossing of state lines for birth control or family planning.
Shhhhhhhhhh

In Texas you can't even mention abortion or preventing pregnancy. It can be a \$10,000 mistake.

I only say some of these things out loud.
I am too horrified by the possibilities.
Nervously she laughs a little too.
Oh Shit she says, I never thought of that.
No shit I say, That's what you have me for.

I wonder then if I should tell her,
Once upon a time our mother was a freedom fighter

Let me go back even further..

43 now, I was 19 when she was born.

Our age gap means she had a different version of our mother than I did.

In my lifetime, our mother was a freedom fighter.

I don't usually talk about our mother but for this,

I'll make an exception.

I've been about that *Roe* life for a long time,

Pretty much my whole life

Long before I even knew what *Roe v Wade* was.

See Mama was a Rolling Stone

Just kidding!!

Mom was a nurse in a women's health clinic.

Now I know what you're all thinking... Abortion Clinic and you'd be right (sort of).

There was so much more to it,

They did so much more than that but Saturday was Abortion Day.

Saturday was the worst day.

A baptism of sorts...

I've been dipped in blood and body parts since I was 6 years old.

I went to work with our mother on Saturdays

We could always see the protestors from a distance as we arrived

Sometimes close to 100 people from both sides

With their posters and megaphones.

Hand in hand, we ran a gauntlet of opposing views,

One side full of obscene photos, broken baby dolls covered in red paint

and venomous insults. The other side, full of freedom fighters, loudly and proudly defending a woman's right to choose and our right to be there.

Once inside I would settle in an office with my back pack of treasures

while our mother ran the
recovery room.

She cared for and comforted countless women in that large quiet room
filled with beds and reclining seats.

Fast forward a little

I am 15 and at home in 1994.

Our mother is at work at the clinic when a deranged man walks into a
Planned Parenthood 2 miles away from her clinic and starts shooting.

He would go on to a second location and start shooting again.

It is breaking news.

When he is done, 2 people will be dead. Five wounded.

The phone at my mother's clinic rings and rings.

My heart stops until I hear her voice.

It was not her clinic.

Now Ill be honest I didn't realize she was a freedom fighter then but I
know it now.

My sister doesnt know this at all.

So when my much younger sister, almost 25, tells me she wants to move
to Texas in our bi weekly ish zoom call, I laugh out loud.

Inside, my heart pounds and I see red.

My brain aglow with the flashing of alarm lights and blaring sirens.

I didn't think it could get worse than it already was. I was wrong.

Struggling With My Right to Choose

Mollie McLeod

ESSAY

I was a few months out of high school when it was rumoured that a classmate of mine had a mysterious hospital stay to her name, the reason assumed to be: abortion.

“You don’t go to the hospital for abortion.” My older sister said, questioning the validity of the rumour, “You go to like, a special clinic.”

“Yeah, obviously.” I agreed, acting like I was as knowledgeable as her, although I knew nothing on the topic. Within two years, however, I was heading to the hospital in the neighbouring town, at seven-thirty in the morning on a Tuesday, to have an abortion.

At first, I felt like a victim. I faced the decision at eighteen, went through a painful medical procedure during my last few weeks of college. Something had been done to me, resulting in emotional distress and physical pain... the essence of a victim.

I had never been blind to the abortion dispute: in the news, the subject of political debates, and newly popularized social media giving people a sense of power by allowing them to voice their opinions louder than ever. I saw posts for and against it, read the hypotheticals posed by the pro-choicers directly to the pro-lifers: what about the cases of rape, when the mother’s life is in danger, or birth control failure—none of which applied to me.

Within weeks, I had decided: I wasn’t a victim. I was of legal age and had consensual, unprotected sex with a man twice my age. I simply made bad decisions. The more I took responsibility for it, the guiltier I felt. Then, in the ultimate paradox, I started feeling guilty for my guilt—how could I call myself a feminist if I regretted exercising one of the most significant of women’s rights? I had never doubted my pro-choice stance, nor did I judge other women, but having gone through it created a debilitating shame within me that I would carry for years.

For over half a decade I lived with a fear of sex that affected my relationships to the point of break-ups, sometimes going years without pursuing

romance. Sexual acts were shadowed by anxiety, guilt, overuse of the morning-after pill, and medical appointments where I insisted that I was pregnant while the doctors asserted that the tests were not wrong.

I watched over social media as old friends and classmates reached milestones: graduations, weddings, pregnancies and births... sometimes more than one before we were twenty-five, while I had neither, familial nor professional success.

“I wasn’t raped, my birth control didn’t fail, and I didn’t go on to achieve anything, so I can’t justify it.” I said in a therapy session, some five years after the abortion.

“Justify it to whom?” my psychologist asked, and I had to take a moment to answer.

“To myself, to the universe.” I told her. She told me that I simply exercised a right, and that didn’t require justification. I agreed, and would use her words to rationalize with myself in my moments of darkness, but I hadn’t truly gotten past it.

It was approaching the seventh anniversary, as the COVID-19 pandemic was subsiding and life was returning to normal—the political war over reproductive rights ever-present—when I decided: I’m not going to let my twisted guilt run my life anymore.

I’d left my dreams of being a writer behind with the starry-eyed Creative Arts student that I was before all the unfortunate experiences of my eighteenth year. Now, in my mid-twenties, a Bachelor’s degree to my name but still struggling to find my life’s direction, I decided to pursue my life-long dream of writing.

I researched furthering my studies, tracked submission calls and deadlines... I was reading my portfolio of personal essays and creative non-fiction for the umpteenth time when I realized: the works of my entire adult life were not just laced with, but soaked in, expressions of remorse that read as anti-abortion; like a born-again pro-lifer scaring other women away from the decision with her horror story.

I had to find the right balance of taking responsibility—for my choices, my

my reactions—and forgiveness: for the unknowing eighteen-year-old girl laying under a thirty-eight-year-old man who said that he couldn't maintain an erection with a condom on, while she put her future in his hands by trusting him to pull out... all the while keeping their relationship a secret, to protect him.

It took me all that time to learn that I can process the emotional weight of the procedure, without absorbing the malicious attacks against women who choose abortion. I finally let myself feel loss for the person I was, for the person I could have been if I'd just made one different choice; and contrite for ever putting myself in that situation in the first place. Then I focused on “now” instead of “what-if.”

Now I write with the eyes of someone who has analyzed, grown, and overcome: truthful and hard-hitting, but not defeatist. It was a long process involving therapy, maturing, finding people in my life that support me, and like with any struggle: it started with admitting the need for help. But most significantly, it was the writing.

I'm lucky to have been a young woman in Canada where I was free to choose; although it's frightening to know that such rights are fragile enough to be taken away so close to home, now that *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned in the U.S.

I always hesitate when I face with submitting my works to nonfiction publications, as I feel my darkest secrets about to be exposed to opinions and hatred from outsiders. I have to remind myself that it's okay to feel the trauma, but restricting myself for fear of judgment only hurts myself; and then I press “submit.”

I hope some publications will accept my submissions. I'd like to think of a young woman somewhere reading my story and feeling a little more understood, validated, reassured; I hope it helps her accept those things sooner than I did, so she doesn't waste years of her valuable life fretting over the inalterable past, and she can ultimately see: you made the best decision you could at the time—and you have the right to do so.

A Brief History of Resiliency

Anonymous

ESSAY

My body is like a roadmap of reproductive rights, a history that began with blood, a history that exacted pain and joy over a lifetime. When I was born in 1950, neither birth control, nor abortions were legal. Some states had laws banning interracial marriage. The government intruded into our most personal space. When I turned eighteen there was a war raging in Vietnam, an intense civil rights battle and a fight for women's rights and gay rights at home. I felt that I was born at a time that demanded involvement. I became part of the movement of women who wanted to change the balance of power over our lives. There was so much to do. The times were empowering. I became an activist.

When the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, my daughter lost an array of rights that I helped win a half century ago. We marched together against the outrage, against a court that took away the most personal and private decisions that control her body. She feels diminished. She feels as if others who have no understanding of women can control her body. She feels like I did when I was young, but I experienced the accumulation of rights over the years. She is experiencing the loss of rights that she believed were secure. Her trajectory makes me angry and ready to fight.

This is not our first fight. My daughter has been marching with me since she was in a stroller – not always her choice of activity. We marched together in Washington, DC on the day after Donald Trump's inauguration. I held a sign that said "Women's Rights are Human Rights." She held a sign that said, "I have a disability and I do not make fun of people with a disability."

...

I look at the health form on the clipboard as I wait for my annual physical. How many children do you have? Three. How many times have you been pregnant? This is a trick question for me. I have settled on ten, but there were more. Even though the question is always asked on the history form, no doctor has ever asked me about the discrepancy or the effect on my mental health. That does not surprise me. Women are expected to be

tough in the face of reproductive catastrophes, it's just a piece of being a woman.

I have faced an array of difficult decisions over the course of my reproductive life—decisions about pregnancy, abortion and miscarriages. That makes me like many women. My story is unremarkable. Over the decades, there have been tremendous changes in the landscape from simple things like early pregnancy tests and ultrasounds to In Vitro Fertilization and morning after and abortion pills, none of which existed when my story began. There have been tremendous changes in how people define their genders and their families. The importance of a woman's right to choose is not confined to a small percentage of women; it is a universal right, a right under attack, a right often triggered by the unexpected, by the unfathomable.

1. My first challenge started with a toothache in the summer of 1970. I was raped while hitchhiking home from the Haight Ashbury Free Dental Clinic, head spinning with nitrous oxide (a/k/a laughing gas), with no cash. Afterwards, I was worried that I was pregnant and the idea of being pregnant by a rapist was beyond what I could handle. I would have to wait for weeks to find out if I were pregnant. I sought home remedies and old wives' tales. I heard that if you took all five of the birth control pills that brought on your period, they could act like an abortion pill. A friend gave me the five pills. I took them all at once. After a while I started cramping and then bleeding. I lay on the bed crunched up like an embryo, then I went to the bathroom and bled. I thought that I might pass out, but I didn't.

I survived twice that week. The self-induced, maybe abortion left no visible scars on my body, only blood on the bathroom floor. I was willing to try anything. I haven't been able to verify if those early birth control pills could have aborted an embryo, but they made me bleed; they worked. The choke marks around my neck faded more slowly.

In some states now, rape victims are without a choice. When a woman is subject to the violence that rape is, when control of her body is lost to violence, how can a legislature take away her choices, her control over her body, her health and her future?

2. I worked as a union organizer on a factory assembly line. A rape victim does not have a lot of confidence for dating. Eventually, though, a relationship began. First, built on chance meetings, then on common political work.

I missed my period and I made an appointment with Planned Parenthood. As I got off the train, I could hear chanting. As I neared the building, a man screamed at me that I was killing a baby; another person stuck a photo of an embryo in my face and called me murderer. They tried to get me to turn away.

A case worker met me inside the door to try to undo what was done to me on the other side of the door. When I left after my test, I had to walk through the gauntlet again – only they were angrier because I had gone inside.

I got the test result. I was pregnant – a failure of the imperfect birth control we used. It was difficult to face having a baby at the very beginning of a relationship at a time when I was fighting the worst of worst memories each time I sought love. My conversation with my boyfriend was serious. I have no actual memory of what he said. I know what I heard. I heard that he was not ready to commit to me. I heard that he would help me have an abortion but did not want a relationship.

The choice was complicated and painful, a difficult process of weighing my own mental state, weighing being a single mother and weighing the fragility of the relationship versus choosing an abortion and trying for a chance to have a better future scenario for a child. I chose not to try to have a child, a child which did not exist yet and, as I learned time and time again, might likely never have existed. My boyfriend drove me to an abortion clinic operating in the pre-*Roe* legal shadows. We paid with cash.

I felt a hard pinch, heard the sucking sound from a distance as if I was far away from the operating table. Afterwards, I lay still for an hour in case I hemorrhaged. I felt the cramps surge and wane. My boyfriend drove me home, warmed up a can of soup for me, and then said goodbye. He was too upset by the experience to continue our relationship. But he came back a few months later, and we began to rebuild our relationship. We moved in together.

Roe v. Wade became the law of the land soon after in 1973, protecting a woman's right to an abortion. *Roe* embodied the concept that the First Amendment of the Constitution has a penumbra where privacy is protected from governmental intrusion.

We celebrated the official end of the Vietnam War in 1975 together, processing the years of opposition we had lived through. We continued to organize and to try to fundamentally change the world around us. Our politics seemed to bind us.

3. We got married because we wanted to have a child. I returned to Planned Parenthood for another pregnancy test. I was confronted by the same mob of screamers, the same horrible pictures. Even though I wanted a child, I still had to endure the emotional assault. I held my head high as I walked through the gauntlet. I felt proud of the rights that I had, which *Roe v. Wade* had proclaimed - that control over my body was a Constitutional right. I felt empowered.

I lost the baby on a highway in Ohio in the thirteenth week of pregnancy traveling to a political gathering with my husband and a friend. The bleeding started in New York State. I called my doctor from a rest area and he said that spotting was normal in the first trimester, not to worry.

As we drove through Ohio, the spotting turned to bleeding. At the next rest stop, I aborted tissues, perhaps a tiny fetus in the restroom. My husband called an ambulance and I was brought to a hospital in rural Ohio where they did a D&C to protect my health.

I wonder if I would be able to get the care that I needed today in Ohio.

4. My doctor said not to worry. "Miscarriages in the first trimester are common. It just means that the fetus was not viable. It's a natural process. Just try again in three months," he said. Ninety long days. Try again. When you lose a baby, you feel more than empty. You try again to fill that emptiness.

At the time, I was working on the swing shift at an auto plant. I walked about ten miles every night on the assembly line. At first, I was running after the cars. At first, I couldn't move after work until I soaked in a tub. After a while, though, the body adapts to the speed of the line. I built 350 cars every night and soon I didn't feel the pain. I had time to read between cars. I couldn't understand how such a strong body could lose a child.

My second try ended after only eight weeks. My doctor said the same thing he said after my first miscarriage. It was not an answer for me. I switched

doctors. I lived in a swirl of infinite hormonal swings. My husband traveled a lot. I cried a lot. He didn't like to talk. His body was not being mangled from the inside. His brain was not seething. His heart was not broken.

5. My next pregnancy ended in a blizzard in 1978 while my husband was travelling. The snow was so high that the city could not plow the side streets. My street was entirely blocked. I was five months pregnant, bleeding again. I called a friend who lived across the street from a local hospital, so his street had been plowed. He got as close to my house as possible – on the nearest main street about two blocks away. Friends carried me down the street to the car. I lost the baby in the hospital.

I was devastated. I stopped working on the assembly line. No doctor had asked me what I did for work, but my body was telling me something. So little seemed to be known about what was happening inside women's bodies in those years. There were few women doctors. There was no Google. I just kept trying again and again.

6. In May, 1979, I heard a heartbeat for the first time. I began to hope. My husband and I took our first parenting class. We toured the hospital where I was to deliver. I interacted with other expectant parents. I finally felt the rhythm of being pregnant, its mystery, its excitement and joy. It had been a horrific three years of pain and disappointment.

On Memorial Day the phone rang late in the evening. I heard my husband laughing.

"It's my tenth high school reunion and a bunch of my friends want me to meet them for a drink. Would you mind if I go?"

"No, of course not." I said.

I didn't know that he met up with an old girlfriend that night. By the time I gave birth to a baby that I felt that I had carried for over three years, my husband was living with someone else.

He came to the birth. I agreed because I hoped he might change his mind about leaving us when he actually saw the baby, but he didn't. I had been blind to what was happening to my marriage while I was consumed by my pregnancies. I had been blind to the fact that my husband hadn't shared

my pain.

The birth was not easy. After fifteen hours of labor, I was exhausted. I needed an epidural. Then things moved even slower. I tried to push. The doctor said that the baby was looking up and was stuck. He looked at the monitors and said that the baby was in danger. He pulled my son out by his head with large metal forceps, tearing my body in the process, creating a scar along the fault lines of my reproductive health.

“Don’t worry about the bruises on his head,” he said. “They’ll go away.”

He handed me my son. All of the obsession and loss disappeared and became memories already rapidly fading. He had a head of black hair and violet eyes. The sides of his skull were black and blue and a bit indented. I loved him dearly. He was gorgeous.

I began the grinding days and nights of a single mother. My parents, who were working, helped whenever they could. They had great joy as grandparents which they transmitted to me until I stopped being so sad. I was able to share with them the magical changes of my son’s first year. My ex-husband visited. His role at the beginning was so painful for me that it is all a blur. I know that he and his family gave me some relief, that they were kind to my son, but I was too hurt and exhausted to be gracious. When my son was three months old, I found a home daycare and began a job as a clerical worker at a local college. I was able to take a course at lunch-time and to work towards getting a bachelor’s degree, which I had begun many years before. When my son was eighteen months old, I got hired by a Union as an office manager. The officers who hired me had overthrown entrenched union officials and brought in the fresh air of reform. After a while, I was allowed to leave early on Wednesdays to take college courses through a continuing education program. When my son was in pre-school, I got my BA and applied to law school. My son went to daycare and then elementary school; I went to law school. In the evenings I played with him until he went to sleep. I often fell asleep with him and woke up at midnight to finish the homework. My divorce came through. When my son was finishing first grade, I graduated from law school and, in the fall, I married an officer of the Union. He raised my son with me. He was the one who helped me with the everyday parental duties like picking my son up from school, feeding him, taking him to the doctors. Sometimes he coached my son’s teams and he always showed up for games. He has been my partner

for over thirty-five years.

7. When we decided to have a child, my body was already crisscrossed with scars, stretchmarks and history. I was over thirty-five and had an amniocentesis in the fourth month. We waited for a phone message that all was well. Instead we were told that we had to come in and meet with the geneticist. The doctor told us that the baby was severely damaged and would probably not be able to survive. A loud roar inside my head blocked the information – information that I could not accept. Together, my husband and I made the gut-wrenching decision to terminate the pregnancy. We cried together.

This decision is now illegal in a number of states.

8. We tried again. For the birth of my second child, my husband was a loving partner who helped me through the pregnancy, who made decisions with me about things like a natural birth and breastfeeding. The difference in circumstances was enormous. I had become a lawyer and knew that I could support my children. I had felt loaded down with worries when my first son was born. When my second son was born, my partner was by my side sharing the birth. I had a natural birth without an epidural. My son was born into a chaotic family with an eleven year old brother and two working parents. He had a joyous and empathetic character. He made us laugh at everything he laughed at.

9. Two years later, I became pregnant again – accidentally. We thought that it would be ok to have another child. Three children meant that our younger son would have a sibling closer to his age.

I was sitting in my office in the sixth month of the pregnancy when I felt a severe pain in my womb. The ultrasound showed that the baby was dead. I was told that I had a choice to wait and give birth to a dead fetus or have an abortion now at the end of the second trimester. Carrying the dead fetus to term was too painful to consider and fraught with danger to my own health. The type of procedure that I went through was two part. The doctor inserted a stick into my cervix, the opening to the uterus, and I went home. My husband held me through the night as we mourned the death inside of my body. The next day the abortion was performed at the hospital.

Today there are states which would force a woman to carry a dead fetus to term – a dangerous situation for the woman’s physical and mental health.

10. Two days later, I went back to work. Eighty-eight days later, we began to try again, my old obsession returning. I became pregnant again and in my sixteenth week, I went into early labor, which the doctors were able to stop. For four months after that I was confined to bed rest, depression and fear. I was over forty when I gave birth to my third child. She was full term and beautiful.

We began to notice differences with my daughter. She seemed to flop over sometimes like a rag doll. She did not make sounds – except for crying. We began a long journey with her to address a neurological condition which has created obstacles for her in every aspect of her life. She has had a profound effect on our family, sometimes binding us closer, sometimes pulling us apart. She is full of strength and vulnerability.

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On December 30, 1994, a terrorist attacked the two clinics that I had visited in Brookline, Massachusetts killing two women, one employed at the Planned Parenthood clinic and one at the abortion clinic. Five others were wounded. It was a violent attack against a woman’s right to choose.

I am afraid that there will be more violence against women and providers.

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The history of my body is not an unusual history. Like so many women, I was confronted with hard decisions and painful experiences that were tragic and mundane at the same time. I also experienced the joy of having children that were deeply wanted. Today, in many states, the decisions that I made have become illegal. While the maternal death rate in the United States, based on data released over the past few years by the Center for Disease Control and by the World Health Organization, puts us way behind many developed countries and the percentage of deaths is significantly higher among Black women, health options for pregnant women are being chopped away in many states. The options we have are also dependent on the resources we have. People with money will be able to get the services they need, but many will not, and all of us will lose the dignity and the

self-esteem of agency.

My daughter worries about so many things – her ability to survive in a world where she faces mountains to overcome, where peace and prosperity are illusive, where civil rights are at risk, where hate has become politically acceptable to many Americans, and where the planet is heating up. Women’s reproductive rights are under attack. My daughter, my sons and their partners are deeply affected by the uncertainty. The times call for action in many ways – through marching, through the ballot box, through running for office, through mutual support and local action, through writing. I say to their generation, “You are living in a time that demands involvement. The times are empowering and I will follow you.”

