

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HEART THIS? MICHAELLA A. THORNTON

“...Even the powerlessness of illness can be liberatory for noticing what healthy people do not, for reading a text with a fresh eye, for being transformed.”

-Rebecca Solnit, “Woolf’s Darkness” in *Men Explain Things to Me* (96)

I. ON MOWING THE LAWN

Our two-bedroom, one-bath 1928 red brick bungalow is situated high on a hill in a suburb immediately outside of St. Louis City limits. Where we live is a moderate topographic challenge I regularly do sweaty battle with when I mow the lawn. Some neighbors have suggested I tie a rope to my Craftsman push mower and let the machine down the hill, like a coal miner down a darkened shaft. I think that’s far too dangerous and inefficient, so I push the mower up and down, down and up, taking my time in the process and enjoying the sun on my face.

My father taught me how to mow the lawn when I was 11 or 12, on a weekend he had visitation. Mowing the lawn was a task my mother did not want me or my younger sister Jenna to learn—she was fearful that we would cut off a toe or a foot or run over an errant rock that would blind us. My father was of a different opinion. He taught us the tangible joy of cutting grass, of how delicious a cold Pepsi tasted after a motorized walk, of the technical importance of having a mower with a Briggs and Stratton engine.

To me, mowing the lawn has never been a chore or domestic drudgery. Mowing the lawn will forever remind me of my big-and-tall father teaching me a skill my dear mother didn’t want me to know. So, when I married later in life—me 33 going on 34 and Brandon 35 going on 36—I was happy to mow the lawn. Mowing the lawn felt like a small rebellion of gender norms, of defying others’ expectations of how my husband and I would divide and conquer household labor.

Truly, I enjoyed solving a problem in less than an hour—of watching the patches of Bermuda grass and dandelions get cut down to size. Of instilling a sense of order in a world that often does not, cannot, operate that way.

II. LUCINDA

This is the story we tell ourselves about our first child. She will be an Ewok baby, chubby and hirsute, with my husband's 20-20 vision and brown-black hair and my full lips and long legs. We will decorate her nursery with the Periodic chart (his preference) or with major constellations (mine), or maybe both (a compromise). I will sing her folksy-soul lullabies—Gillian Welch, Al Green, and Beatles tunes—in the rocking chair my mother rocked me in as baby, the rocking chair I once dragged down a stretch of Atlanta highway after it toppled from the bed of my red pick-up truck. I rescued the chair at age 23 and had it reconstructed, lovingly restored at 30.

The chair sits in the basement of our home in a cool, dry place.

This unmet child will have older parents who met each other somewhat later in life, and by “later” I am using Midwestern—not East or West Coast—standards of coupling and reproduction. This imaginary child is more than just a twinkle in my eye. She is Spica, the brightest star in the constellation Virgo, the star that early astronomers likely used to discover the precession of the equinoxes: a deliberate and continuous change of the Earth's axis.

Provided my more prolific siblings don't claim this name, she will be named after my great-grandmother, whose name meant “graceful light; illumination.” A name that comes from the Roman goddess of childbirth and fertility, a giver of first light to newborns. She will be a child we have waited to hold for quite some time.

She will be so loved.

III. REAL WOMEN

When my mother was in labor with me—her first child—in the fall of 1978, my young father, more accustomed to overseeing cattle bearing calves in the starlit field, told my momma if she made as much noise as the shrieking woman next door that he would leave the room and let her deliver me by herself.

The cows were surprisingly quiet, my father would tell me later.

My mother, age 23, anxious and determined not to bring me into the world by herself, did as my misguided father asked her. As a result, she broke the blood vessels on the right side of her face, a violet spider web of determination and madness, refusing to moan or make a peep until her giant, German-born doctor found out why my mother was eerily silent during delivery.

“If you tell your wife to be quiet again,” the doctor yelled at my father, “I will have you escorted out of the hospital. Don't ever tell a woman in labor to be quiet.” And my 24-year-old father, a former football player at the University of Kansas, shut up and did what he was told.

“Why did you listen to Dad?” I ask my mother in my early 30s, when I began

trying to conceive.

It took her thirteen years of marriage before she left my father, so I know I shouldn't be surprised.

She shakes her head and says, "I don't know. I was so young. He had already told me that if I couldn't have children, he would divorce me. You took a year to conceive. Before I became pregnant with you, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to have a child."

When she tells me this, I think of Henry VIII and his rage at not producing a male heir. I think of Rachel and Leah, a fertility battle of epic proportions, even though I am not a particularly religious woman. My brand of religion has always resided deep in the woods, in the night sky most Novembers when the Leonids appear, and in the calm of powerful prose. I also think of another birth three years after mine: Elizabeth Jordan Carr, the first American baby born from in-vitro fertilization.

We were both born at 7:46 a.m.

Upon hearing my mother's labor story, I think of my situation, our situation, and I squeeze my husband's hand. I know this fear all too well. Though I know Brandon would never give me fertility-related ultimatums, silence me, or leave me, I feel the weight of my mother's experiences, of the irrational fear that I'm somehow broken. From Greek mythology to pop culture, infertile women have been portrayed as destructive monsters, bitter, jealous hags, and, in the case of *Raising Arizona*, one of my favorite movies, baby snatchers.

I am 37 with three and a half years of marriage under my belt. I thought when I was ready to have a child my body would cooperate with my heart. But the heart isn't just a lonely hunter; it's a fucking dolt. It wants what it wants even if I told myself long ago that I would be just fine if I didn't have children.

Intellectually, I know having a baby isn't what makes me a woman, even if my youngest sister Layne, age 23, the mother of three little boys, once tweeted, "You're not a real woman unless you've had a child." I do not know what it means to heart this, yet people do click a little yellow star (before there are red hearts) in response. I read with rapt attention when a nurse from Ohio calls my sister on her insensitive statement. I star this stranger's rejoinder.

At the time of Layne's social media declaration on "real" womanhood, she didn't know we were, we are, struggling with infertility. I didn't know how to tell most of my family then because my two sisters, who became mothers before they were in their 20s, do not know what it is like to want a child and then be physically unable to have one. Many people don't know the number of women in the United States with "impaired fecundity, the ability to get pregnant or carry a baby to term," totals 6.7 million. Meanwhile, according to the Centers for Disease Control, the number of women who have ever used infertility services reaches 7.4 million.

I belong to a select group, a group whose membership is not desired or courted or typically talked about—a self-imposed oath of silence. The "number of mar-

ried women ages 15-44 [who] are infertile (unable to get pregnant after at least 12 consecutive months of unprotected sex with husband)” totals 1.5 million, or six percent of the American population.

Millions of us wait, often in silence, politely listening to a colleague at an office party who complains that having a child has curtailed her writing schedule, that she, a Fulbright scholar, thinks it’s funny that she thought she was “busy” before the birth of her child.

I look at her, hoping my look is not too scornful, and nod. I don’t readily share my struggle because everyone has advice on how to rectify my situation. I don’t want this woman’s sympathy or to take away from her own true feelings. Yet the unsolicited advice I often receive minimizes the pain and isolation and annoyance and ugly jealousy my husband and I sometimes feel.

So many say:

“Don’t worry so much.”

“Relax.”

“It’ll happen when you’re not thinking about it.”

“Pray to God.”

“Give up gluten.”

“Lose some weight.”

“Take a vacation.”

“Try acupuncture.”

“Visualize the sperm meeting the egg.”

“Get a massage.”

“Eat sweet potatoes.”

“I wish I were in your shoes.”

“Do you want my kids? Here, take them.”

And my father, ever comforting, tells me that “sometimes genetic lines are just supposed to die out.”

I would give almost anything to have a child at a work party playing a tiny piano, shrieking with joy and disgust when a young dog licks her face, to struggle in balancing my writing and my profession with parenthood (a struggle that is real and important and deserving of empathy and support), but to never tell another human being that they don’t know what “busy” is simply because they’re not a parent. If I am ever lucky enough to have a child, I want to remember not to condescend, not to assume, not to take for granted what others work so hard to have, what still others may never experience.

Our society has a standardized narrative about what it means for adult life to be demanding and significant and full, and having and raising children is often a big part of this story. Yet there are so many other stories. Stories of the infertile, of the feminist, of the ill, of those whose lives and unions do not revolve around heterosexual reproduction or adoption, of the bereaved, of a story that did not end

the way we had initially planned.

IV. ENDLESS FUCKS

I pocket and rub well-worn stones of reproductive worry, often alone in my car, on the way to work, at stop lights: What happens if we cannot have a biological child? What happens if Brandon is never ready to adopt? What happens if we are a childless couple? There are adventures to be had, sure. We can plan fantastical trips abroad, serve our community, take early retirement to a little cabin in British Columbia, and revel in lazy Sundays where we make elaborate brunches, play loud music, and give and make endless fucks. We can imagine a happy, productive, and child-free life, but neither of us thought we had to.

When I surround myself with these screaming what-ifs, I remind myself to breathe. To make noise if I need to. To cry and gnash my teeth and laugh. To not burst any blood vessels.

I thought, like many do, I wouldn't have to think about infertility, miscarriage, and the agonizing two-week wait each month, excitedly tracking days past ovulation on a smartphone app, and divining if this cycle would be "the one." I have watched my best friend, her friends, my co-workers, my dental hygienist, relatives, and others bear children (multiple) in the time we've waited. The longer the infertility journey goes on, the more I wonder if I will bear a child.

V. UNHERALDED BOUNTY

I have had well-intentioned hands placed on my stomach and asked when we were going to start a family. When I tell the pray-to-God types that I'm pretty sure this is a medical issue, I'm told maybe that's why I'm infertile. Belief, they tell me, begets blessings. I am a wordless, heedless stone who lives in a state that has no law requiring insurance coverage for fertility treatments.

I know it's irrational, silly even, to cry every time my period arrives, but almost every month for the past three and a half years, I have.

The tears are beginning to run out. More and more, after my period arrives, I crack open an elderberry beer and eat unpasteurized cheese and sushi at will. I revel in the wonder and the fun of Saturday mornings where uninterrupted sex and random adventure—a weeklong trip to Big Sur, kayaking in Tecumseh, a caffeine-propelled trip down a home improvement aisle to purchase primrose, s-hooks, and potting soil—can always be on the menu if we want it to be. I am more and more determined to enjoy right now—to savor what we have versus what we want.

If I have learned anything in our longing for a child, it is that our life is full of unheralded bounty.

VI. BLOOD

Add chunks of potato to the mixture for blood sausage. Then look in front of the bowl where the sheep's stomach, no longer in the sheep, awaits the ruby red mess and spices a great-aunt blends and mixes as you wait, one-eighth Creek Indian from Missouri, who is mistaken for Sioux, at the gas station with a mustang on the sign. You are tall, almost six feet so, with long brown hair, love handles, and fertility-goddess thighs. Venus of Willendorf has nothing on you. You wonder how much of your father's mother resides in you. You rarely claim it since you have no tribal-affiliation card. You tell few about your grandmother's cinnamon skin.

Your grandmother was born in 1929 or 1930, no one really knows for sure, to a woman, your great-grandmother, who was 42 or 43. This scrap of tenuous family history comforts you.

The bowl of blood still sits on the kitchen counter, as the great-aunt, who speaks no English, does her thing. She wears a thin silver pony tail, thick glasses, and a flowing floral sweat suit. You look away from the bowl as you make another attempt to dislodge a frozen turkey neck and innards from the cavity of a 20-pound bird. Only hot tap water can help you now.

Maggie, the mother of your friend Christie, the reason you are here, is hovering and asking, "How's the turkey coming? Has it thawed yet?"

"No, not yet," you answer, "but it will."

You are overly optimistic when you have no idea about an outcome.

VII. THE BEAUTY WAY

Eventually the turkey thaws, but you are not sure if that's a good development after you've over-saturated the limp turkey neck and other necessary odds and ends, imperative for making giblet gravy. You've watched your mother, your late grandmother, make this gravy. You believe by culinary osmosis you too can cook the gravy. But you can't. You pretend to Maggie and the great-aunt. You don't want to be yet another mostly white girl in the kitchen, incapable of cooking a meal, failing to bond with women who know how to feed their families.

You missed seeing the stomach in the sheep when the animal was still breathing, before the sun rose over the relocated Navajo to see Christie during her Beauty Way Ceremony for her soon-to-be first child. You've performed an internet search on the ceremony and turned up empty-handed. The lack of return thrills you. You like knowing some mysteries are protected, sacred.

Suddenly you are into begetting, like when you see babies in strollers at the grocery store, where you buy hummus and sweet Nantes carrots. You-me-see little ones and something inside hums with hunger. The small of the back and the blood in my hands begin to warm.

The shift from second person to first: I want a baby.

After leaving the kitchen, I gaze appreciatively at Christie, seated on blankets in the hogan, and look into her almond-colored eyes. She is so beautiful with her heart-shaped face and swollen belly. It is mid-November and she is due in a month, maybe sooner. She wears her ceremonial red-and-black dress. Great hanks of silver and turquoise hang from her neck. The necklace looks like a claw, but it is not. The necklace protects Christie and wards off evil: an accessory whose power I envy.

The medicine man stands and turns. His appraising gaze meets my shy one, and then he slowly faces each member of the group of 25, maybe 30, men and women sitting in a circle around a smoky fire in the middle of the hogan's cold earth.

He says solemnly, "Before we begin the ceremony, I must tell you that if anyone here is menstruating, she will have the power to steal my voice." I look down at my hands. Hours earlier, during the several-hour car ride from Tucson, I felt the familiar slippery-twist barb I have known since I was 12.

Instead of stealing the medicine man's voice, I leave the hogan and enter the main house, where the young children and softly snoring great aunt watch Billy Idol on MTV in the living room. "Cradle of Love" and "Dancing with Myself" sing us, the uninitiated, asleep.

VIII. THE FIRST TIME

On the phone, twisting the cord of the land line around my 12-year-old wrist and waist and then releasing the cord to begin again my nervous figure eight, I begged my mother to tell my father to run to the grocery store on my behalf.

"I cannot tell him," I whisper-hissed to my mother. "You have to tell him, please."

My mother agreed immediately, so I yelled for my father, thrust the phone into his calloused hands, and quickly left the kitchen, past the refrigerator and stairs, and then waited in the living room, straining to hear what my dad said when my mom told him I had gotten my first period.

When my father finally got off the phone with my mother, he looked at me for a moment and then said simply, graciously, "I'll be right back."

IX. MOUND CITY

We are driving back from my younger brother's Nebraskan wedding, and the gas-station toilet won't flush. I watch the ineffective water pressure barely eddy around the toilet paper covered in a bright red glob of blood and clot. Red like the lipstick of pin-up queens and classic cars. I hear the growing line of women groan in this two-person public restroom, and I curse.

“Flush,” I will the toilet. “Flush, damn it.”

The toilet remains unmoved. After several minutes of flush-and-wait, flush-and-wait, I leave the stall in defeat, and tell the impatient crowd that the toilet is out of commission. The line of women, now snaking out the door, look at me with accusing eyes. I bow my head, walk out, and then walk to the front of the store to tell the cashier the news.

“Yeah, I know,” she says, looking me up and down. “Someone was telling me something weird was happening in the first stall.” I just look at her. Brandon magically emerges from behind a case of two-liter soda pop bottles, hiding, I think.

My cargo is about to leave me, but I don’t yet know that my body has been boarded by a fetus for only eight short weeks (a missed, or silent, miscarriage), or that I will bleed afterwards for 17 long days.

After the miscarriage, a big part of me questions the importance of carrying a biological child, of what family really means to us. I would love to adopt. Brandon, however, is not ready to give up on biology and blood. I tell myself to wait a little longer. A lot can happen. Thirty-seven isn’t a fertility death-sentence anymore. I tell myself not to be the parody of a desperate, childless woman. Some days this pep talk works; other days, especially the days when my predictable Swiss-trained period arrives, I cry at stoplights and wonder why this is happening.

X. WHAT TO DO AFTER A MISCARRIAGE

1. Mow the lawn
2. Cry
3. Water the plants
4. Write
5. Sleep
6. Sleep some more
7. Grocery shop
8. Get a migraine
9. Vomit in four to five quick bursts
10. Rue the breakfast choice of fruit salad and boiled eggs
11. Finally go to the ob-gyn on Friday
12. There is no evidence that you exist anymore, except for the blood and a thickened uterine wall, which means more blood will come this Memorial Day Weekend

So, after my doctor’s appointment, I go to Cousin Hugo’s Bar & Grill, order a Hefeweizen and a patty melt since my iron is low and fried food sounds fantastic. Elton John’s “Tiny Dancer” and Neil Young’s “Old Man” play on the radio. I over-

hear a new couple on a date and I think of my first date with Brandon, drinking and conversing and flirting. A magical first kiss in the parking lot of a comic book store.

A bar is a fitting place to mourn, to hear the comforting sizzle of the grill, “rolling down the highway,” and the laughter, genuine laughter, of a woman enjoying a date with someone she barely knows.

Whatever happens, whether we have biological children or children of the heart, I feel at peace in this bar where a five-point buck wears reflective sunglasses and Cardinals baseball banners adorn the walls.

The blue-and-white checked vinyl table cloths, the glint of sunlight on the studded leather backed bar stools. The books—*When the Legends Die*, some random romance novels, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*—underneath the deer on the mantle above the fire place while “No More Mr. Nice Guy” blares over a silenced golf game on the bar TVs. Broadcasters discuss an Alabama man’s arrest, who, upon being picked up for drug charges, said, “I’m innocent. Roll tide!”

After I write all of this in a green-leather journal, a bartender comes over and asks me to sit up straight since a few of the bar patrons can see the crack of my ass. I could care less. I pay the bill and collect my things and leave. I eat a pot brownie later that night and no longer sob but laugh and laugh and laugh. Somehow this is better than Steps 1-12.

When I wake up in the morning, the THC-induced euphoria will be gone and my husband and I will go about our day, our month, our year. We are the only ones who know about this unspoken grief.

XI. CONFLUENCE

Before Brandon and I started trying to conceive (TTC), I came home and told my husband that my IUD had fallen out of my cervix, whereby he reported sheepishly, “Well, there was that one time we were having sex that I thought I felt something sharp.”

“What?” I blurted. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He just shrugged, like it was an everyday event to feel metal stabbing one’s penis; the mythical man-eating vagina come to life.

After I had the IUD removed, I vetoed the hormones of birth control. For the first time in a long time, I was free.

When this decision was made, we decided we would welcome children. My own bowling league, I had once thought. But 32 didn’t yield a baby. I wasn’t yet charting my period, basal body temperature, cervical mucus, and Clomid cycles coupled with Intrauterine Insemination or even aware of when I was ovulating.

Thirty-three found me planning an August wedding in Grafton, Illinois, where the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers converge into a great confluence. I walked down the aisle to The Supremes’ “You Can’t Hurry Love.” We danced to

the Dead's "Turn On Your Love Light," ate wedding pie a la mode, and I gripped Brandon's hand tightly as the float plane lifted off Vancouver Bay for Whistler, British Columbia—a honeymoon by an emerald-green, glacier-fed lake.

No honeymoon baby for us. When we returned, I turned 34 less than a month later. We will try for a full year until we ask for help.

XII. DON'T FORCE THINGS

At age 35 I use the basal thermometer on my bedside table, the ovulation predictor kit to detect when luteinizing hormones are good to go, and there is the smartphone app where I dutifully record all this data about our sex life, my cervical mucus, and all the other little observation points that make me feel like my sixth-grade science experiment on the contrasting crystallization rates of sugar-vs. salt-water solutions.

My husband's equipment and resulting jet-propelled sperm work just fine. I know my lady bits are anatomically correct and not blocked thanks to the modern miracle of hysterosalpingogram (HSG), a procedure where dye is injected into the cervix and x-rays are taken of the uterus and fallopian tubes, but my Anti-Müllerian hormone (AMH) levels, the protein hormone that determines my ovarian reserves, the number of viable eggs I have left, are low. Not yet empty, but very low. Just one good egg is all we need, I tell myself. Just one.

There are internet forums and websites dedicated to women who share their fertility charts, if they get a smiley face (yes, a smiley face) on their ovulation predictor kits (OPKs), what types of pills, hormones, and stages of intrauterine insemination (IUI) or in-vitro fertilization (IVF) they're at, when they've miscarried, had chemical pregnancies, gotten BFPs ("big fat positives") and BFNs ("big fat negatives"), and there are even personalized digital signatures that women use to announce how old the hard-won child is if one is lucky enough to conceive, in addition to a litany of milestones, medical procedures, and medicines it took to arrive at the hallowed BFP.

I don't feel like the skeptical, infertile feminist's guide to baby-making has yet been written. I don't call sex "baby dancing" (BD) or my period "Aunt Flo" (AF) or the "witch." I have attended one RESOLVE meeting, the National Infertility Association, in the basement of a local library with 35 other women and men. After waiting months, I finally attended a meeting. When it came time to introduce myself to the group, I cried three sentences into my introduction. While I was grateful to be with people who were sensitive and aware that not everyone has children easily, if at all, the acronyms and laundry lists of medical interventions and drugs left me weary and overwhelmed. My invisibility lessened, but the medicalization of hard-fought maternity made me question at what physical cost I wanted to bring a child into the world.

I admire the women who keep trying, and I wish them all "baby dust," de-

spite the dumb phrase, which conjures, in my mind, a vision of lady-bit glitter and bejeweled, bedazzled uteri. I stalk their discussion board forums, late at night, eager to see if it's possible to have implantation bleeding at 14 days past ovulation (dpo); not likely (read: my period is en route). To read of someone who has waited years to see her first positive pregnancy test and later to hold her precious child, to smooth her cowl, inhale her scent, and see which features are whose. To scrutinize basal body thermometer charts like mine, calculating the likelihood that this miniscule temperature rise I'm observing might mean something hopeful.

The best advice my father has ever given me is "don't force things." The deeper I tunnel into the rabbit hole of infertility, the more I wonder about simply letting go.

XIII. NOT A PLANT

Traditionally, I am good at growing things: big rainbow and black krim tomatoes from seed, Kentucky Wonder green beans, Echinacea in three colors, and overflowing moonflower vines, a small yet mighty savings account that has yielded us our first house, and, quite often, my students' skill and confidence in their writing.

Like the non-flowering orchid that sits on the top of the bookshelf of my writing nook nearest the picture window, I wait. While the violet blooms of the phalaenopsis dropped off last winter, the internet tutorials and YouTube videos swear that the blossoms will return after I re-pot the orchid from its original, constricting container, ensure the root system is healthy, get rid of the roots that are not, and give the plant fresh soil: western fir bark, hardwood charcoal, and sponge rock. I have cut off the yellowed flowering spikes above the healthiest still green nodes, which may still start another flowering off-shoot. But ultimately, I must wait for the orchid to bloom. At least a year, maybe more, before this plant will flower.

But what happens if the purple blooms never come back?

This much I know: I will keep this plant. The broad, deep green leaves are healthy regardless of the plant's flowerless state.

Of course, I know I am not a plant.¹

XIV. WHAT REMAINS

On a whim, Brandon takes me to see the Leonids. We are still figuring out who we are in the context of one another, and when he says let's stay up all night and watch a meteor shower, I am ready. Eager to impress, yes, but I am also moved

¹ I did throw the orchid away after the leaves became more yellow than green. Nature did not cooperate with this saccharine-sentimental metaphor. It's for the best.

by his idea—a date no one had ever taken me on before. A chance to see celestial bodies while holding the warm hand of a good man.

When we arrive at Meramec State Park in the middle of the night, I park the car and spread blankets on the cool ground. We sit down and look up, leaning into the heat of our bodies, straining to see the meteor shower. And when we see the Leonids' brilliant streaks tear across the night sky, our breathing becomes even, in sync. The small talk stops. We hold on to the stillness of the moment and watch the flickering sky. We feel our hearts beating through the palms of our hands.

And whether a child ever comes to us, we have found each other. Two imperfect, fumbling creatures waiting for bits of space rock, dust, iron, silicate, and broken fragments of comets to burn up upon entry into the earth's atmosphere.