

Lena Simic: Artist Pages

Maternity leave note, March 2014

I am writing from the space of interruptions, from park benches and with a March wind in my hair. James is asleep. I steal a moment of reflection. Endless park walks in solitude. James is now nine weeks. We are still counting in weeks. The park benches seem places of respite, recovery from the event itself. These are short bursts of writing energy, now compiled and edited into one maternity leave note.

I better move on soon... Too many ducks, geese and pigeons are around us. I sometimes share the space with dog walkers and toddlers who feed the birds. We smile at one another in Stanley Park.

The event itself was recorded immediately. I wrote frantically as if on some mad mission of remembrance. I no longer need to think about it. All the remembering has been done. I could remember every detail if I wished. I could rehearse the scene. I don't think it all goes away.

I am writing from the now at which I wonder why I ever suggested this article while on my maternity leave. My now is composed of interruptions, baby grunts, burps, always at the edge of crying and an insistent demand for attention. I am not independent or in the right frame of mind for writing an article.

My now smells of dirty nappies, vomited muslin cloths and sour milk. My now is full of joy as the baby smiles and laughs at every opportunity. I am typing this into my laptop; he's puking away and smiling, next to me. I live alongside this baby, bonded together, dependent.

Maternal studies, theoretical Framework

Political thinkers Hannah Arendt (1958, 1963) and Adriana Cavarero (2000) both refigure the notion of natality (as opposed to mortality) and the act of birth (and birth stories that later on define our life stories) as a call to newness, new beginnings and the human capacity for action. Such properties mould the way that each particular human is. And yet it is only through our utter dependency on others, who are to birth us, and furthermore carry and tell our birth stories, that we become capable of acting in the world.

In my creative document I draw on this particular feminist theoretical framing within maternal studies in order to emphasize a dependency that comes with new beginnings and new action. It is also peculiar that such newness of action usually starts within a medicalized and managed environment, where vulnerability is exposed, care is given and reliance on others is paramount. The story here is of a particular, unique, new human being, and it is the mother who is narrating his birth story, in a new, uninhibited voice, that speaks of the joys as well as the difficulties of a new motherhood.

While Adrienne Rich's seminal work *Of Woman Born* (1976) provides a critique of medicalized birth and in particular laments the fact that doctors and hospitals took over the birthing practice from midwives and home environments, this personal birth account moves beyond such notions of power built through location and particular medical roles. This birth story is invested and is, at the same time, lost in the particularities of emotions that come in a very individual story of a new beginning.

The mother refuses to lose agency over the story just because it happened in hospital and ended up in an operating theatre. She refuses to feel defeated because of the lack of 'the right conditions'. This account carries her agency; the future possibility of narration, it is a performative account, which defies the past, and exists in spite of what happened. And yet this account is at the same time the very beginning of a life story for James Benjamin Anderson.

Maternity leave note, April 2014

'He looks like all of you,' a friend said as she opened her door and saw James for the very first time.

In Dubrovnik for Easter holidays, in rainy weather, while visiting family, I feel lighter as I spend more time without him. He's surrounded by people. He's learning. The same old carrying of prams and babies up and down Greba Street where my parents live, up and down the steps. I overheard a woman aged 42 complain how she feels she hasn't achieved anything in life – a conversation next to our table in a cafe. Some sort of laziness has come over me. Baby James has adjusted well to the weather and the different water for his formula. He's relatively happy. He opens his eyes every morning and smiles smiles smiles when he sees me. This expression-full laughter with not so many sounds, just some cooing now and again.

I think about how Kurt Cobain has now been dead for 20 years. I am reading Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, an observational projection into being 19 again. I live through it, all the teenage angst. I am reading it slowly to delay the end, and prolong the time spent within it. I smoke a cigarette, with my morning coffee, which seems the height of my craziness at 39.

I think about so many things forgotten, completely lost, wilfully not remembered. I think about things swallowed and not recalled. I usually keep myself busy and fill my life with irrelevant tasks. Now, on maternity leave, I feel I am moving away from such an ordinary life, stumbling across newly repaired pavements with a pram, and noticing that things are being built, constantly renewed. I am content like this, with a baby, with my contemplative thinking alongside the baby, sweet silly creativity.

Baby James is fighting with sleep in his cot. These are familiar nerve-wracking sounds.

I wonder about who still cares about Kurt Cobain, angel face, blue eyes, all that blond and kind of scruffy. So familiar, so dead. I cut my hair short. I don't look any younger, but a friend told me that with every child we lose five years.

The Bell Jar makes me slow and incredibly sleepy.

I drink so much caffe lattè, macchiato, Coke Zero.

I am getting there, towards the mental. It's tense and full of inertia.

I don't think anyone truly understands how unsettling it is to bring life.

All of us and none of us are in it together.

Fragile and breaking in moments.

Mostly alone.

I was ovulating yesterday.

That pain and that knowledge that it is all over for me now. Baby James is my final baby.

I see a contact card from Little Explorers nursery and a feeling of hope fills me. A sense of future. The time will come. In the meantime, James has started babbling. He wakes me up with his singing sounds.

References:

Arendt, Hannah (1958) The Human Condition, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, Hannah (1963) On Revolution, New York, NY: Viking Press.

Cavarero, Adriana (2000) Relating Narratives: Storytelling and selfhood, trans. Paul A. Kottman, London & New York, NY: Routledge.

Rich, Adrienne (1976) Of Woman Born: Motherhood as experience and institution, London: Virago.

Birth Story: James Benjamin Anderson, 10 January 2014, 4.15 a.m.

10 January 2014

Gary and I were watching True Lies on Film4 from 9 p.m. to 11.30 p.m., with lots of commercials. It was very funny. I wondered if I would ever be sexy again. I started having irregular contractions, painful but not unbearable. We decided to go to bed. It must have been at about midnight when we both fell asleep. I remember getting into bed fully clothed—I was that cold—and then slowly taking them off and throwing them on the floor.

I woke up at 3.09 a.m. I checked the time on my mobile phone. I went to the toilet. I woke up because I was dreaming about different levels of pain. There were two kinds of pain in my dream. However, when I woke up I couldn't feel any pain, not at first. After having a wee and going back to bed, I felt a small leak onto my pad. It was pinkish. I felt my first awoken contraction. I woke Gary up. I knew it was time.

He's lying on me right now. He's been awake/alive for more than 12 hours. I put a little 'Lighthouse' vest on him. The name James sounds so 'young boyish', or 'teenager' or 'adult'. How do you call a baby James? Jamie or Jay? His little hands are cold. There's a constant beeping sound here at the ward. I write so I remember.

I get myself dressed very quickly, picking up all the clothes from the floor. Gary started calling Dan to come over and look after the boys. No success. I went downstairs. I was by the front door. Sarah! We need to call Sarah! At first an answering machine, but then she calls back, almost immediately. I tell Gary he should go and pick her up. It was 3.20 a.m. or so.

I remember being in the house and looking at the kitchen cooker clock moving from 3.28 to 3.31.... and contracting, and managing rather well, walking through them. The yoga camel walk helped, deep consistent breathing. I was alone. Gary came back quickly. He had already briefed Sarah on the kids' school drop-off. I know we were in the car heading towards Liverpool Women's Hospital at 3.38 a.m.

I am so tired, but I am scared to fall asleep with James sleeping on me. What if he slips off and falls? I am too tired to take care of him properly, unless he's in his little see-through hospital cot. I wonder how we will survive the night ahead, me in bed number 18 and him in his cot next to me. My other children are supposed to arrive in 20 minutes or so.

I remember not being able to walk though the parking lot of Liverpool Women's Hospital without stopping. I held on to the cold railings of the bus stop. I could only move in between contractions.

Why does breastfeeding hurt me so much?

We were in a lift. We arrived to the Midwife Led Unit. They didn't know we were coming. I went on to all fours in the corridor: some woman was being wheeled in. She couldn't believe my show on all fours in the corridor. Once in the room, I started going for the floor. The midwife moved me onto the bed, not to hurt my knees. I took off my trousers and knickers. I could see blood. I felt the urge to poo. I am not sure about the time.

The contractions were very strong. It was as if someone was ripping me from inside, stretching me out. The midwife kept saying I will have my baby really soon.

I have this tube in my right hand and it hurts and it's so impractical and it will probably not be used anymore. If only they could take it out.



The midwife agreed. I am thrilled!

11 January 2014

James is sleeping on me. Tough night last night. It got better from 4 a.m. In between breastfeeding frenzy, crying babies, snoring mothers and beeping machines. Life on the maternity ward at Liverpool Women's

Hospital: mat base, room 4, bed 18. The Midwife Led Unit is like a luxury hotel.

The crowning is a familiar pain; it's ripping you open. It's bearable because it's familiar. Tear, cut. His head came out at 4:11 a.m. I remember being at the bed and wanting to stand up tall from my 'on all fours' position. Instead I had to lie down and they spread out my legs. I had to push. Another shoulder dystocia. He got stuck for 4 minutes. We pushed/pulled him out at 4:15 a.m. There was no panic. He was placed on my tummy. The lights could have been darkened. I poed just before crowning. James poed as he was coming out. Waters broke. It was all bloody, mucousy, shitty, smelly, slippery wet... The midwife was six months pregnant. She wasn't bothered much about all the mess. The baby was on me, below me: slippery mess. We were waiting for the afterbirth. My contractions were still present and now I was stuck – no movement allowed. Some large pads below me. An injection for the placenta – waiting for some time. Nothing. They clamped the umbilical cord very near to my vagina. The metal clipping was so uncomfortable. All was out of my control.

He is fast asleep. He prefers to sleep in the morning rather than at night. What generalizations for a newborn. Early this morning he seemed hot to me; now he's cooler but somewhat yellow. Does he have jaundice? He poed for Britain – the midwives said. This was as he was coming out. He's had three or four poo nappies yesterday. One was multi-coloured from black-green to brown-yellowish. I wish they would tell me the time I will be allowed to go home. It's the nights that are dreadful here though. Days are OK. Everyone else seems to need more care and attention than me; they are more delicate, more important. That's OK. Is he blond or is he ginger? My skin looks so old, yellow and pigmented right now. Gabriel said he's got my nose. From my other three children, he looks most like Gabriel.

The placenta wasn't coming out. An hour has passed. A doctor came to see me; she's tried to pull it out. No luck. I will need to go to the theatre. The anaesthetist arrives. She's explaining the process. I'm out of it. There's a risk of bleeding, haemorrhaging. No, it won't be an epidural, only a spinal, which is less complex.



James doesn't like his hospital cot. I think it's cold. He likes to sleep on/near me, in my bed. Why wouldn't he? We've been together for 39 weeks and 5 days. I am counting the time since my last period.

12 January 2014

We're home; I am shattered. Breastfeeding is painful; it hurts. Why are they lying in those happy brochures? Big women with big happy breasts and tiny, sweet, suckling babies. No, it bloody hurts and your nipples are chewed to bits; it looks like there are parts of it missing. Oh, it must be poor 'latch on'. If I hear or read that once again... No, it's not a poor latch on actually. Midwives and health visitors and Liverpool BAMBIS (Babies & Mums Breastfeeding Information and Support) and all the Internet videos and advice people have checked it – no, it's not a poor latch on. I am making the baby open his mouth as wide as he can and making him eat the nipple - push the nipple down his throat. I've been awake for hours on end feeding him and it hurts. It hurts throughout the night. Paracetamol takes the edge off the pain. 'Your nipples will need to harden up,' says the midwife. They are not as militant as they used to be with breastfeeding when I had Sid. It must be reports in the media that women who are choosing not to breastfeed are feeling bullied. I wish I could be one of those women with the power to choose not to breastfeed. I wish I could exercise such agency. But no, I need to be torn up by guilt. Yes, I am still persistent. No, we haven't made a formula bottle yet. We are still doing it, thanks to lanolin cream and some mad determination I have based on my knowledge of performance art and endurance. Give me labour any day instead of the excruciating pain of breastfeeding. There are a few women on Internet forums who agree with me. I am not unique. I am not the

only mad one. There we are, scattered across planet Earth. The truth behind breastfeeding for women with sensitive nipples. Myths about painless breastfeeding exposed!

James is finally asleep on his own, on the couch with his onesie over him. He's been refusing to sleep on his own – no cot, no carrycot, just skin to skin. This is a real success, a sense of independence.

One of the BAMBIS's women was gorgeous. I wanted to say: 'You don't need to breastfeed!' I couldn't stop that line coming into my mind. She has a 3-year-old daughter whom she still breastfeeds. 'Maybe she's a single mum.' I'm doing it again.



I imagined I was Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill* trying to move my toes after the spinal. The operating theatre was full of women, jokes, laughter, music, only one man. A really competent anaesthetist, really young and trustworthy. She said she did A level in theatre studies (after I said I was a lecturer in drama). She still managed to get into medical school with no science A levels. She had to work hard. The only guy in the theatre joked about me giving up birth control early on, after telling him about James being my fourth boy. I was squeamish at the placenta. They all laughed. I told them I could never be a doctor or a nurse. They were trying to make me comfortable and joked they weren't complete barbarians – we try our best, they said. They moved me from one bed to another. I was completely paralysed. I was worried the feeling in my legs would never return. It did, after two hours, just like they predicted. All went well. The placenta was out. Gary showed up with James in my recovery room. It was around 6:30 a.m. I called Nela at about 7 a.m – 8 a.m in

Croatia. At this point I couldn't move my legs.

13 January 2014

It's exactly a year since the miscarriage. 'I'd rather have him,' says Gary. James is asleep in his carrycot. He's full of formula. He's content. The moment when he got his first gulp of formula was magical. It was late last night and Gary brought it to bed. He was transfixed. He couldn't believe his luck. He became alert. What is this magic potion? Minutes before I was in the living room breastfeeding and crying in pain. My nipples are cracked. Some bits seem to be missing. After BAMBIS (the mother gets shot in the cartoon, I remember!) had left, things started to worsen. Lanolin is only preventing/hiding the inevitable – deep cuts on the nipples. I dread every feed. I am not enjoying the sucking little monster. Giving him formula projected us both into blissful, painless heaven. Yes, there's guilt. He's asleep, about to awake. My full milk hasn't arrived yet; maybe I am unsure. Oh, you would know. I don't want to belong. I don't want to belong. Peer pressure. Is there anyone I know who has given their infant rat poison formula milk? Oh, stand up for yourself, take agency! I texted BAMBIS: 'Thanks for your message, but we've decided bf is not for us. Very happy on formula now and in total painless bliss. Magdalena x'



I will still be trying for a bit. Otherwise I feel I don't deserve this special status. Sitting around loving my baby. To breastfeed is to be a patient, is to be in pain. Otherwise, this is too much bliss. Baby is easy. Where's the suffering and constant craving from James?

Being in the maternity ward, mat base, room 4, bed 18 was a removed experience. It seemed cold and dark. This is the hospitalized birth everyone wants to avoid. The woman next to me is a nervous wreck - suffers from anxiety and can't stop talking about it. Her first born is a diabetic. She misses him terribly. He is called Edward. She's just given birth to a little girl who is in neonatal care. She talks non-stop; she snores throughout the night too. Beeping machines calling for midwives, who are not coming, all the time. I am kind of forgotten. I don't seem that important. I am breastfeeding. I am so exhausted in the night. I cry. Food is OK. We never gave any 'thank-you' cards to anyone. That feels weird. I hardly remember the first midwife who delivered James. Sarah? Colette? Babies are constantly delivered there – they come and go. They must have forgotten about us already.

Why didn't we give out 'thank you' cards? To Sarah and Colette, to the operating theatre team. Yes, we should do that. But when? It's not going to happen now. We never gave any 'thank-you' cards to Keepmoat Joanne either. I really wish we had.

We've come full circle from miscarriage to today: new baby, new house. James is asleep. I am writing. Gary is on the computer. Yes, it is possible for it to be easy, but is it allowed?