



The New
Mothers'
Writing
Circle

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Foreword

Catrin Kemp, Founder, The New Mothers' Writing Circle

When I first began dreaming up The New Mothers' Writing Circle I'd probably never uttered the words 'global pandemic'. The project's aim, back then, was to bring together a group of new mothers, to get them writing and empower them to reflect on their personal journeys through the first few months of motherhood.

As the project began, incredible similarities began to emerge between living through the COVID-19 crisis and new motherhood: A sense of unreality, of shell-shock and a lack of preparedness; of time taking on a weird, stretchy quality; a homesickness for our former lives coupled with a lack of language to describe the new identities we found ourselves in.

What these new mothers – and new mothers the world over – were and are still living through is unique; a sort of motherhood squared, a beautiful, surreal nightmare within a momentous global crisis.

The New Mothers' Writing Circle (increased to weekly sessions in an attempt to maintain close connection with the mothers at such a vulnerable stage) covered topics from maternal rage and love to sleep and identity. We read excerpts by Rachel Cusk and Esther Morgan, Toni Morrison and Jenny Offill, and we returned to Naomi Stadlen's *What Mothers Do (Especially When it Looks Like Nothing)* again and again. We watched Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie talk about the dangers of hearing a single story and within three weeks George Floyd was murdered. This pamphlet of writing sits within the context not just of the coronavirus pandemic but the global Black Lives Matter movement too.

Our creative writing grew from a huge range of prompts – imagery, folklore, stories from differing angles and 'what if' starting points. We learned what it was to write and share freely, to have butterflies in our stomachs when reading our work aloud – for many of us, for the first time since school. The writing here is made up of short stories, accounts of births and breastfeeding journeys, conversations between our innermost selves, poetry and letters. Some are excerpts and some are presented in their entirety. At every turn, the mothers have been brave, creative, honest and funny, and have, without fail, supported each other. I thank them all for everything they brought to this pilot project. I am so grateful that we got to meet, just that once back in March, before everything in our lives became *so damn virtual*.

Additional thanks must go to Genevieve Herr, whose brilliant writing prompts and exacting edits helped shape the writing contained here. Lydia Davidson was absolutely instrumental in the smooth set up and running of the workshops; without her knowledge and skills this project, without question, would have been lost. The authors and academics who gave their time to share their depth of experience and writing know-how – Carolyn Jess-Cooke, PM Freestone, Abie Longstaff and Susan Berridge – brought a richness of voices to the workshops and were always insightful and incredibly supportive. The project would have been a shadow of itself without any of these bright, strong women.

Finally, thank you to the funder, Creative Scotland, and in particular Literature Officer Vicky Adams, who championed The New Mothers' Writing Circle from the word go.

I hope you enjoy reading these contributions.

Catrin Kemp
Founder

More of our writing and information about the project can be found at:
newmumswriting.co.uk

E: tnmwcglasgow@gmail.com



@newmumswriting

Mama, I Really Did Try My Best

Amanda Ajomale

Mama, I really did try my best.
He did nothing wrong.
He went to the park; he was wearing a mask.
Stopped and searched because his skin was suspicion enough.
His mother is my mother, but my blue eyes and golden hair shield me from the crime
of my Negro blood.
His skin, dark, like hers, is reason enough, punishment enough, to lock him away,
hide him from society.
And still we fight violence with silence and somehow expect it to stop.
'Mama, I really did try my best,' I said in my one phone call.
The call I only got after begging, pleading.
Down on my knees in tears, crying for my mother.
Born of a Black woman, born of a Black woman, born of a Black woman,
whose blood runs through these very streets,
whose breasts nursed babes who would grow to hang her own children from trees
for sport.
They see it in the shape of my nose.
An African man in a white man's skin.
And my eyes are as blue as my tears are wet,
tears for my brother whose only crime was having a Black woman for a mother.
Punishment before judgement.
Walking while Black,
and that one drop of Negro blood was enough to alter the value of his life.
Should I, then, consider myself lucky?
Had my skin been dark like my brother's,
My eyes darker,
My hair curlier,
Would I even get to call my mother?
Would I even have the chance to hear her voice one last time before my soul was so cruelly
snatched from this earth by those who consider my hue a threat to their own existence?
Mama, I really did try my best.
But maybe my children can do better:

The Perfect Day After All

Karen Angela

Breathing heavy it all feels so tight, she's sweating, panicking. She mustn't cry or she will smudge the perfection of her make-up. Her mum wraps her arms around her and she feels reassured, but the tears quickly build up, like a dam ready to burst. With not a second to think any more about it, her makeup is being touched up, her mum helps her buckle her 'something new' shoes, her sister is sorting the trail on her dress. It's almost time...

Despite her thoughts, she looks and feels absolutely stunning, her long dark hair hanging down in loose curls, lace flowing and sparkly beads hugging her figure. She watches all her family and friends arrive at this spectacular venue, huge smiles on their faces, she can hear laughter and see the excitement they have for this long-awaited day. But for her it's different, there's something missing, she's been waiting, waiting and hoping, hoping he'd step out of one of the many taxis she's watched come and go, but she hasn't seen him yet. It will be the perfect day regardless, she tells herself as she looks at his outfit hung out perfectly, waiting for him to arrive. A grey tartan kilt with grey jacket and socks, his size nine shoes neatly sat beside.

They've had a strained relationship since his affair but she's his girl, his first-born baby girl, and she longs for him to see sense, to see his face as she reveals her beautiful dress, for him to see his baby girl in the most precious dress she'll ever wear. This is a moment he will never get back.

'Time to go, Diamond.' Her mum's words prompt a smile, as the photographer continues to capture the final moments and her journey down the spiral staircase. Her mum carries her trail, while her sister guides the kids down, and suddenly they're ready for the grand entrance. She takes her mum's hand at the left and her boy's on the right and, after the flower-girls and her maid-of-honour, it's her turn to walk down the aisle to her future.

She smells the perfume her future husband has bought her, its sweet, floral scent. She looks at her baby boy and tells him, 'It's time to go see Daddy', and, with her baby on one side, her mum on the other, her husband-to-be waiting for her and so much love in one room, she steps forward. She knows this is going to be a day she will forever cherish.

As the doors open, she hears her family and friends gasp, cameras flashing as they capture their first glimpse of her and she is aware of how tightly she is squeezing her mum's hand. She has longed for the day for so long, and as she locks eyes with her future husband it's like there is no one else in the room. For a moment, she forgets the troubles previously playing on in her mind.

During the ceremony she sees glances of her nearest and dearest warming their rings, making wishes as they rub and admire them. As the story of their love unfolds, they share tears and laughter with their guests. The memories continue to be made and shared throughout their day as the photographer captures little details that she would have otherwise missed. Her son blowing bubbles in the gardens, her god-daughter, niece and nephew playing happily in the sun. Her gran telling stories of when she was little.

Later on, she pauses to take it all in, looking around the room as the music plays. Her auntie is the first on the dance-floor, smiles all around and she realises her day is perfect, just the way it is.

To Innes in 2037

Deanne Cunningham

Dear Innes,

Happy 18th birthday from 2020! I hope you're having a wonderful day. We recently celebrated your first birthday here. The sun shone, I bought far too many helium balloons and we sat in the back green at Wilton Street drinking champagne and eating sugar-free cake (about as tasty as it sounds). The coronavirus meant we were only allowed four guests, and your poor grandparents weren't even allowed to pick you up for a cuddle. But we had live music from good pals, enormous piles of presents and you crawled around delightedly in the scrubby grass. Never happier than when you've got grubby knees.

One year of having you in the world with me. One year of waking up to your sleepy smiles. One year of being your mother. A word which still feels alien to me.

And what a year it has been. It's impossible now, of course, to imagine the world without you in it. You came and your arrival shifted everything, tilted the axis of my world, and nothing was ever quite the same again. Including me. In the last year, you've taught me more about patience, anxiety, tenderness and the intricacies of different tractors than I ever thought possible. And love of course. Unimaginable love.

Becoming a mother feels like embarking on a life-long journey of transformation, one that I'm only just at the start of. It's been a tough ride at times, but with you beside me, I'm beginning to appreciate this new person I'm becoming.

It's fascinating to wonder who you will be at eighteen. Right now, you are so golden and delicious. Chubby, sturdy little legs, sandy curls at the nape of your neck. An obsessive Hoover lover and a neophyte harmonica player. Today I love nothing more than to kiss the unlined soles of your feet, to receive your wet, open-mouthed kisses. It's impossible to believe that one day you will be a grown man. I hope that we have done an OK job of getting you there. That we've kept you safe and secure; that you are happy and confident. Are you bookish and creative like me? Or sporty and scientific like your dad? Perhaps you're both. Maybe you're neither. I already know that, whoever you are, I'll love you the same. And surely by now you'll let me sleep later than 6.30am.

And who might I be by then? Only time will tell, but I have no doubt you'll continue to stretch me: to push me to my limits, to make me cry with laughter and boil with rage. To teach me about who I am and to shape the person I am still becoming. I'm going to miss these precious baby times so much – your sleepy head on my chest, the indescribably lovely sight of your bottom in the bath. But there will be many more adventures to come. No matter how old we get, let's still dance to David Bowie in the kitchen.

Most importantly, I hope you know that you are very loved. That you always have been and that you always will be.

Have a great birthday (and don't get too drunk please).
With love, your mother xxxx

First Night Home

Genevieve Herr

When I wake up, he is standing over me with something in his arms. There is a subdued wailing in the room, like a distant car alarm.

'You need to feed the baby,' he says.

He looks tired too, his voice is thick with sleep.

'We don't have a baby,' I say. I'm too startled to pretend, but I can see right away that was a mistake.

'The baby,' he says. 'This baby.'

He holds it out then; an actual, real-life baby, and I have never seen it before in my life.

From the bed where I sit, inexplicably sore, I can see a straight line to the front door. We always leave the keys on the shelf beside it when we lock up. I could run for it. I would turn left, to where the park is, where I know a few of the neighbours by sight. I wonder if they will let me in, a woman clutching a baby in the middle of the night. But, somewhere, there are parents missing a baby.

'Are you OK?' he says.

The room is cast in a strange half-light, a light I associate with illness. There is, in fact, a bowl next to the bed and a large glass of water. A packet of painkillers. Someone has put towels down on the bed.

I push back the covers and put my feet on the floor. Stalling for time. He watches me. 'I'm fine,' I say, gently. 'Give me the baby, OK?'

He looks immensely relieved and puts the baby in my arms. I get the briefest impression of a small wet mouth, bony limbs drowning in white fabric.

'You need to feed her I think,' he says uncertainly.

With the baby crooked awkwardly in my arms, I lift up my T-shirt. The baby knows better and shifts its head away. I realise that the droning sound in the room is the baby crying. 'You could try the feeding pillow,' he says.

He hands me a circular pillow, stiff and striped blue and white. He helps me lie the baby on it. I flex my feet against the wooden floorboards. A straight line to the front door, snatch up the keys. My bare feet slick on the wet pavement. The lock is stiff when it rains. Somewhere out there, someone is missing their baby.

In the sick-room light, the room takes shape. A wooden trestle with a basket resting on it. The rug pushed back. Shutters left open, rain against the glass. The kaleidoscope shifts. Shutters dropping in my mind.

The T-shirt I'm wearing is my husband's. We took three with us. The first two sit balled damply in a carrier bag at the foot of the bed. A thin plastic hospital bracelet is on my wrist with a date on it and my name in biro. The baby has a similar tag – it just says, baby. The striped pillow, which my friend dropped off a few weeks ago. It works for some people, she said. Give it a shot.

We had a baby, I think.

But We Survived (Excerpt)

Catrin Kemp

So much of that time was wrong.

My sensible waterproof remains on its hook for weeks on end. Blue skies and sunshine. I wade through plastic toys and endless food debris. After a week stuck indoors, I hand the baby to my husband, dig out my old trainers and hobble out of the flat.

I begin to run in 60-second bursts, using an app on my phone to coach me. Down the steps and along the river; over the bridge and up the hill, through the park and then a loop back towards home. I try to notice what it is to be living through this time; I try to note down words to describe it in an effort to find *meaning, joy, gratitude*.

One day in April I notice three mallards sitting in a row, like teenage boys posing on a wall; the following week, a mother duck passes me with miniature balls of fluff and feather paddling in her wake. In the same spot days later, a majestic heron tiptoes silently through the shallows of the river. This to me is something. The fact that I have looked and seen and noted.

My playlist grows to include uplifting disco and seedy house music; steady, repetitive beats that drive me on to put one foot in front of the other.

*She's ready to fight, she's ready to bite, she's ready to stay up all night
She got fifty dollar bills, she got fifty dollar bills*¹.

I run now for 3 minutes at a time. Over the music, I hear church bells ringing and I take out my headphones. Somewhere, things are normal. Parishes. Small communities. Perhaps I am nostalgic for a time I never lived through – when being a woman and a mother was more straightforward: A sturdy pram, a scrubbed floor, an intricate brooch on a brown wool coat.

*That's how the good Lord works
That's how He works*².

It is May. Weeds sprawl from the sides of the pavements and grasses grow a foot high. Hundreds of yellow poppies, everywhere you go. My little boy, not yet three, holds my hand as we wander slowly down the street. The same way we walked yesterday, and the day before that. He sees endless dandelion clocks, snails, dried dog poo. I see people's trimmed hedges. Teddies and rainbows in the windows. I admire cherry blossom and a neighbour's choice of door colour. His hand reaches blindly for mine when he returns from bashing yet more dandelion fluff. Underneath the ache of loneliness, I feel a bud of joy swell in my heart. The sheer miracle of him, the beautiful crown of his head.

*Stay with me, don't lose me now
So I can thank you for just being so damn excellent*³.

I run for 12 minutes along the river; crowded now with people from all over the city looking for beauty. *Where is the mother duck and her ducklings?* I see a dog in a Hi-Viz coat. It says NERVOUS in large black capitals along its flanks. I want a bright orange t-shirt which says OVERWHELMED.

I run for the full 30 minutes. Cheers and fireworks accompany me through my headphones, June sunshine beats down. Once I would have felt elated. As it is, I am questioning why the hell I thought becoming a mother was a good idea. I suspect, just like in the days after my baby's birth, that I will learn to look back at the pandemic, dry-mouthed at the horror of it all. *It was incredibly intense, I'll tell anyone who asks, but we survived.*

A longer version of this piece can be found at newmumswriting.co.uk

❶ Sworn Virgins, *Fifty Dollar Bills*. Quoted with kind permission of the artist and their publishers DEEWEE Studio (Belgium) | ❷ The Joubert Singers, *Stand On The Word*. Quoted with kind permission of the artist and their publishers Favourite Music (France) | ❸ The Juan McLean, *Happy House*. Quoted with kind permission of the artist and their publishers DFA Records (USA)

My Breastfeeding Journey

Lori Love

We are called 'mammals' (from Latin mamma, 'breast') because of the presence of mammary glands in our breasts which produce milk to breastfeed our young. I used to think of breasts as a visually-pleasing part of my body which could potentially attract a mate, but not as much more than that.

That changed with the birth of baby Yasmin. All of a sudden, my breasts were producing a white liquid that would keep my baby alive. At first it felt like I was breastfeeding for twenty out of twenty-four hours. Yasmin would scratch my insides during the last month of pregnancy, so it didn't surprise me that she continued this behaviour while she was on the boob. She would scream and we had no idea why. Also, my nipples were being shredded. It felt like Gerard Butler from the movie 300 had yelled 'THIS IS SPARTA!' at me and kicked me down a black, bottomless pit.

Other mums would sit in cafes, having coffee and cake, reading a book, their babies blissfully attached to their boobs. How on earth was I supposed to do that, while trying to get my baby to latch on at the correct angle, while she screamed, scratched and yanked at my hair? Not to mention the blinding pain in my nipples. Each time Shaun brought her to me, I wanted to run away.

'Give her formula,' I would say.

'Your supply will go down.'

'I don't give a shit, OK? Were you a Medieval torturer in your past life?' Now I'm glad I kept going. And I'm thankful to Shaun.

Yasmin was born via a C-section, so my milk came in late. That's why she would scream. She was also a big baby, so she lost more percentage weight than other babies. The midwife insisted we supplement her diet with formula. Her big spews afterwards added to our distress. Yasmin was very close to being hospitalised, but managed to scrape through.

Luckily, our sister-in-law, a consultant obs/gynae, told us there were double breast pumps available to hire from the hospital. This breast pump turned out to be a game-changer and helped increase my supply. I wonder now if other women, who don't have an obs/gynae in their families, get proper guidance from the midwives.

The six-week growth spurt was brutal. I was up at least forty-eight hours, mostly breastfeeding, on the verge of insanity. My delirious mind wandered, looking for ways to make things better. Can I do some coke? No, it will get passed on to Yasmin. Can I hand Yasmin over to some stranger on the street and go to sleep? No, I will go to jail and Shaun will leave me. Can I wear earplugs and go to sleep? No, I might oversleep and Yasmin might go hungry.

There was sweet stuff too, which, I assure you, greatly outweighs the difficult stuff. All my breastfeeding troubles ended after six weeks. I too could have finally breastfed at Costa while having coffee and cake with a book in hand, had it not been for the bloody lockdown. Hopefully soon. I love how Yasmin asks for milk like a baby bird – blind, quivering, helpless, with an open mouth. She says, 'Mm? Mm? Mm?' in her sweet, bird-song voice. I get to feel like her saviour by reuniting her with her beloved boobs. I love the feeling of her warm, pudgy body against my chest. I love her gasping and gulping noises of satiety. I love how she looks up at me and bursts into giggles with my nipple still in her mouth. It's so easy to soothe her no matter how upset she gets. I can see it on her face – how she appreciates having a little nook where she feels cozy, secure and nurtured. I realise there will be a point in the not-so-distant future where she will develop a more complex personality and I will have to invent new ways to help her solve her problems. But for now, I have my breasts and I'm grateful for them.

Holding Her

Ishbel McFarlane

I didn't have to hold her the first time I held her. I'd been carrying her all these months and we had spent twenty-four hours dancing together, blindfolded, not knowing our partner. And here she was – my dance partner, held up in silence so I could see her sex. I don't know what happened then. I was on my back, someone else's legs in front of me in stirrups. My arm was stretched out on a thing, full of things. There were so many people there were so many lights and it was over. The baby. The baby. A real baby. This baby. The first time I held her it was on my chest. Skin-to-skin, skin-to-skin, skin-to-skin, the holy phrase of my antenatal classes. I felt like a magic healing stone – lay her on me and the fairies can't get her, can't come and steal her breath. I held her as a stone holds up. I was heavy and happy in my nakedness, like a stone. I was a joyful glacial stone in a flat landscape, left there a million years ago for this – sun-warmed.

Milk Drunk, Baby

Rowena McIntosh

While I was pregnant, I attended a breastfeeding workshop. Before the session, we were encouraged to watch a video of a brand-new baby, just seconds old, slowly inch its teeny pink body up its mum, blindly find her breast all by itself and start feeding. There was probably soothing classical music playing.

'Aren't a baby's innate instincts amazing?' cooed the workshop leader.

Nothing like being shown the highest possible standard before you start something completely new. For me, this hands-off, baby-led approach doesn't happen. In fact, I don't seem to have enough hands to both hold and position my baby. He seems to have at least three and they are all in the way. My partner has to pass him to me with his little arms pinned to his sides, a tiny human rocket. Destination: nipple.

In the workshop we were shown photographs of breastfeeding women reclining on sofas and beds, looking so relaxed they could be advertising them. Now, a cushion tower has to be retrospectively built around me and the baby. In my rush to stop the hungry cries, I don't have time to get comfortable before I'm pinned to the spot. I stare longing at my phone, the remote, my snack, sat tantalisingly just out of reach. 'Is it a good latch?' asks my partner, as he wedges cushions under my elbow. 'Can you pass me the Netflix remote?' I reply.

In the pictures, the women are smiling down at their babies. They look happy. The reality is that it really hurts. My nipples bleed. It takes so much determination to put him to my breast, knowing it will hurt.

'Perseverance' says the kindly midwife, who visits on his third day in the world, 'that's what you need to get through these first few weeks.'

I count through the discomfort at the start of each feed, an old running technique, to distract me. Sometimes the baby and I cry together. Driving home from a lunch with all his grandparents, he screams with hunger the whole way. A red light never felt so long. Rushing into the flat I fling my dress with the subtle nursing flaps across the room, ditch the bra, haul him to me.

'Sorry wee man, home now,' I sob.

He's crying because he's empty, me because I'm so full and uncomfortable.

It's frustrating, trying to master this new skill. But we're in it together, and when his eyelids droop and he falls off the boob with a big grin and a full belly I quietly sing to the tune of 'Love Shack':

'Milk Drunk, he's a Milk Drunk.'

And it's worth it.

Never Closer

Marita Neely

My mother's arms pull me closer to her chest, holding me firmly but lovingly. We laugh at how my feet splash gently in the basin as I bob up and down on her knee. She picks up the big yellow sponge, heavy with water, to wash my feet. She tells me a story – how Jesus would wash the feet of his friends. His way of telling the world that he was there to serve others. I gaze at her and smile contentedly. This is home, where I belong.

Evening is approaching, bringing with it a breeze through the open back door. Its cooling presence is welcome in the heat of the kitchen, where a pot of stew bubbles away on the stove. All the delicious smells of my mother's cooking mix together in the air. I close my eyes to discern each unique scent; lamb, oregano, thyme, the earthy smell of vegetables and a tantalising hint of cinnamon unveils what is baking in the oven – an apple pie made with buttery short crust pastry.

I can hear my siblings playing in the garden. I brim with excitement at the thought of telling them what tonight's dessert will be... but that will have to wait. I want to savour precious time alone with my mother. Just the two of us.

A soapy, disinfectant smell rises from the basin and is quickly washed away by fresh water from the jug. While my mother scrubs my skin, I study the basin and jug with their matching Greek Meander pattern. Outside of wash time, they sit proudly on my mother's chest of drawers; jug within basin, flowers within jug. Daffodils in spring, peonies in early summer and whatever wildflowers I uproot as gifts throughout the rest of the year. Every evening they are temporarily housed within another vessel, so that my sticky hands and grubby feet can be cleaned.

My mother sacrifices her favourite accoutrements gladly, willingly and with unconditional love. She doesn't mind the spiderweb cracks that have weaved their way over the surface of the jug. She turns a blind eye to the chipped enamel of the basin. Time, use and clumsy hands have added features to the once pristine blue and white washbowl and jug. With a warm smile she lets me know she wouldn't have it any other way.

Squeaky clean and wrapped in a fluffy cotton towel, I perch on a stool and watch as she meticulously washes my siblings next – one, two, three. Her love not divided, but multiplied. In those moments I unknowingly learn the parenting skills that I would later practice and cultivate on my own daughter.

Now that I am a parent I often think back on my childhood. I think of that little girl, sitting quietly and watching everything so intently, her legs dangling in the air. Her only concern; if she would ever have legs long enough to touch the ground. My mother knew I would. She believed I would grow, spread my wings and soar. Every time I bathe my own daughter, I am reminded with a deeper understanding of the love my mother had for me. My Meander-patterned jug takes pride of place on my mantelpiece; filled sometimes with daffodils, other times with peonies and occasionally with whatever wildflowers my daughter tugs from the garden.

It Is Philippa Roloff

If my default response is anger, boredom is my Achilles heel. It is May, still. It is 10 degrees. It is grey and raining. It is Glasgow. It is lockdown. It is this flat. It is motherhood. It is numbing. It is never-changing. It is being productive. It is keeping going. It is staying healthy. It is daily walks in the park, whatever the weather. It is London having 30 degree weather again. It is not being in London. It is socially-distanced-socialising, one-on-one with the same two people for three months. It is having a baby with you at all times. It is counting the hours till the next naptime. It is being available for the auction countdown of every watched item on eBay. It is the rush of adrenaline as I come in with a winning bid at two seconds to go. It is the persistent, fruity smell of baby poo that lingers in my bedroom. It is the piles of crap I want to take to the charity shop. It is having nothing better to do but submit a formal complaint to Hermes following yet another delivery fuck-up. It is the same as yesterday. It is the same as tomorrow. It is waiting in a queue at the supermarket. It is waiting in a queue at the post office. It is going home again, parcels still in hand, because the queue stretches up the street and round the corner. It is waiting for Saturday night's take-away to arrive with the excitement of a four-year-old anticipating her birthday. It is pacing the bedroom, rocking my baby to sleep. It is the downy warmth of his head against my cheek, as he rests on my shoulder. It is discovering that my bedroom measures 10 steps from door to window. It is discovering that it is 15 steps from door to chest-of-drawers to window. It is giving myself another 10 steps until I can put him down, whether he is asleep or not. It is another walk in the park. It is finding a different combination of paths to walk each day. It is finding hitherto unknown areas of the park. It is observing the diurnal unfurling and blossoming of spring, progressing at a different pace depending on the area's exposure to the sun. It is lockdown. It is motherhood. It is discovering that there is not much to distinguish the two.

Somewhere Between Here and There I Found You (Excerpt)

Saima Sheikh

I've imagined this scenario playing out in so many different ways and now that you are here, in the flesh, all I have to offer you is tears.

Her: Has it been rough?

Me: No. It hasn't been rough.

I narrow my eyes, push my tongue to the side of my cheek, take a sip of coffee and a breath too. She knows exactly what I'm going to say, yet I say it still...

Me: The fact that you think it has been is exactly why it's taken us so long to meet.

Her: Do you always need to be so critical?

Me: Yes. You never give me a bloody break.

Her: Ah, I see you haven't lost your bite Saima.

Me: Yep. I still bite. But I'm so desperate to not. So, someone says something and I react. Not to everything, not always, but anything relating to the kids and I bite. These days I take a second thought to think about whether I should, but nine times out of ten, you can bet I do. And I feel terrible and tired afterwards. Even when it's been worth it, but not for the reasons you think but because I'm not getting any closer to the red-haired, blue-eyed, slightly hunched old woman, walking down Byres Road with her waxed coat and bag for life full of closed tulips.

I lean forward so close our noses almost touch, blood rushes through my veins.

Me: Hey so listen, my heart is bursting and I need to tell you why. I've got these really beautiful kids that are my whole life. My eldest, Miriam, she is as old as the rocks and so forgiving. She was born in a storm. I could feel her before she knew she was ready. Then she made her mind up and strong as an ox she stayed her course. She was like a ball of fire coming into this world, a head full of jet-black hair and fists of fury. She looked at me. I'll never forget. A few seconds in the world and she dead stared at me, as if to hold me to account. She questioned me. What right did I have to be her mother? So I cried and I sang and I cried – it's all I had. Luckily it's all she needed and all was forgiven. She accepted me.

I knew though that I would always have to earn my place as her mother. We spent every minute together. I made so many mistakes and she just stayed. She stuck around. Strong, sweet. And it's been real, you know? I felt like becoming her mum catapulted me into the unknown, it unrooted all my banks and I became pure river, rushing towards something. What, I'm still not sure.

And then there's Esa. If Miriam was the storm, then Esa was the calm that followed. He has a face like butter, soft, creamy and it melts into you. Two huge black eyes with just the right amount of space for a kiss between them and these soft pink lips that never miss a drop of milk.

Together, they keep this river flowing. I've never known a love like this.

But I have so much anger and rage. Becoming a mum just brought that out. Everyone around me is tilting their head sideways, hoping to empathise, patronising instead. It is what we do as a polite society. I catch myself doing it to others and all I am is a big ball of rage. I have a fire in my tummy and a hope that sparks that flame. I don't always like people much, but I am so full of hope for them. I am always hopeful for a better tomorrow. It's no coincidence that I remember that one quote from *Cat's Eye*⁴. 'It's old light and there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by.' But the rage exhausts me. I want to stand at a cliff and hurl out the kind of scream that would compete even with thunder.

Her: So why don't you?

Me: I'm too angry.

A longer version of this piece can be found at newmumswriting.co.uk

⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (1988).



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More of our writing and information about the project can be found at:
newmumswriting.co.uk

E: tnmwcglasgow@gmail.com

