

*Mother wounds.*

*We want our wounds to speak for themselves [...] but usually we end up having to speak for them.*

“Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain” - Leslie Jamieson

- - -

How do I open?

- - -

This is a stitching; a knitting together of things that have been torn. Or, that is the wish.

- - -

Knit one: Louise Glück’s ‘Love Poem’ opens with an act of maternal knitting.

“There is always something to be made of pain”, writes Glück. “Your mother knits.”

- - -

Purl one: I had my son four months ago. My mother knits a blanket; the first time she has knitted since I was a baby. She criticises it as she hands it over to me, says she is out of practice, that she has dropped stitches here and there. But it is the only blanket we have that, when he's born, wraps around him properly.

- - -

Dropped stitch: A few months later, she will tell me that she doesn't remember me being a baby, not really. We'll talk briefly about ancestral wounds and she'll refer broadly to a family curse, to things I don't know, to abscesses bursting. I will continue not to ask.

- - -

Knit one: When I do, I'll be clutching my baby's toy - a soft carrot called Javier that we've decided is our family's transitional object - and I'll be thinking about how to craft this piece.

- - -

Purl one: There is always something to be made of the pain your mother knits.

- - -

Knit one: I want to talk about mother wounds. I want to talk about the long gash of sunlight that falls through a partially closed bedroom door as you wait in the dark, hour after hour, for a baby to sleep. I want to talk about what a birthing ball looks like as it's stabbed with a small kitchen knife. I want to talk about the teeth-grit textures of frozen maternity pads and their smell - lavender and tea tree oil. I want to talk about a shrinking away from certain words: 'special' and 'hypno' and 'oxytocin' and 'skin to skin' and 'third degree', and a keening towards others: 'tear' and 'stuckness' and 'torpor' and 'bind'. I want to talk about camera flashes on the labour ward and the sound of women who feel they are too much, who venture "if you don't mind, sorry to bother, can I just" as they bleed and bleed and bleed beneath the sheets. I want to describe a right hand encrusted in meconium. I want to tell you how it feels when a midwife tells you you're too loud. I want to talk about a circle of women tying red thread around their wrists. I want to talk about tightenings and clenchings and knittings together, about 4-3-2-1 relax relax relax, about twinges, about any news yet. I want to talk about the dropped stitches in the stories that tie mothers to their children, the holes, the unravellings. I want to talk about ruptures and interruptions and

- - -

*What did you say as he stitched you up?*

I said

*What did you say as he stitched you up?*

I said I don't like this 90s music.

*What did you say as he stitched you up?*

I said why is it taking so long.

*What did you say as he stitched you up?*

I asked my mother whether she enjoyed me.

*What did he say as he stitched you up?*

He said something about it being an act of delicate embroidery and I said maybe my vagina will be on Etsy; maybe my vagina is artisanal [but of course I meant vulva but of course I meant perineum but of course I meant back-passage but of course I meant front-bottom but of course I meant under-carriage]

*What did you say as he stitched you up?*

I said: Dr, this is a stitch-up,

I don't have a back-passage

I was never as good as new.

- - -

Pass me the knife.

- - -

In the early weeks following the birth, I see tree branches as shit-covered fingers, the tube on the birthing pool pump as the umbilical chord, the birthing ball as my pregnant belly. Most frighteningly, I keep seeing you as a doll whose head I could pop off.

I find myself wanting to banish every object associated with the birth to close down some of these doublings. As such, one night, as my baby and partner nap upstairs, I stab my birthing ball with a kitchen knife - long horizontal gashes like a running stitch. It doesn't so much pop as sag slowly, bathetically. I watch it and consider how I might turn it into a feminist art piece.

- - -

Aftercare for stitches:

A solution of tea tree oil and lavender in warm water may help. Avoid strenuous activity for the first eight weeks.

- - -

We lay you on a blanket that has my name stitched onto it, from my own early childhood. I make a joke about attachment theory that falls flat.

Every night for two weeks, at the precise time of my transitioning during labour, I contract. Every night for a week, I look, unwittingly, at the clock at the precise time of your birth.

- - -

The Hindu goddess Chinnamastā is taken by yoga teacher and writer Uma Dinsmore-Tuli to be an emblem for the postnatal mother:

[She is the] self-decapitated goddess whose own blood feeds her devotees and herself. The startling image of her depicts the moment of change: in one of her hands she holds her own freshly severed head whilst in the other she still brandishes the bloody sword with which she has beheaded herself. The blood that gushes from her neck flows in three red fountains into the hungry open mouths of her two devotees and herself. [346]

To become a mother, in this formulation, is to wound oneself, willingly, in order to sustain oneself and others, in an orgy of self-abnegation. Who will feed those devotees if you don't? Dinsmore-Tuli also describes the utter wastage of the postnatal body - a description that leaves me abject with foreboding as I read it in late pregnancy:

At a physical level [following birth] the body changes overnight from a living embodiment of ripe fullness into an empty and often damaged and exhausted shell. Even after the most positive birth experience, the postnatal body can be left bleeding, leaking and broken. [346]

*[what do you sing as he stitches you up?]*

You sing 'Bleeding Love' by Leona Lewis

*[what do you sing as he stitches you up?]*

You sing 'Only Women Bleed' by Alice Cooper

*[what do you sing as he stitches you up?]*

You sing 'This Woman's Work' by Kate Bush

- - -

[we are both delighted by the way your little  
mouth snaps at my breast; the way your eyes fix on  
me with ferocious intent]

- - -

I take my placenta capsules.

I pinch fat from my waist and inject antibiotics daily, to prevent the stitches from becoming infected.

I stuff the turquoise membrane of the birthing ball into the bottom drawer where it bulges, obscenely into the room.

I draw the Empress card over, and over and read about Demeter and Persephone.

I throw all my crystals into the garden and listen to them bounce off the fence.

I buy books about motherhood and, mostly, fail to read them.

I buy dungarees.



- - -

People knit things: booties, another blanket, a hat. There is so much knitting for you.

- - -

My hair falls out in long skeins which wrap themselves around your wrists as you feed, knitting your hands into whatever you can reach. I sweep clumps, like balls of wool, from the corners of the bathroom, comb them with my fingers from our rug. In a weird mirroring, your own hair comes slowly, confined to a delicate soft fringe at the base of your head which we take to calling the “neck mullet”.

- - -

In his well-known theorisation of transitional objects, D.W Winnicott writes how “the baby starts from early months to pluck wool and to collect it and to use it for the caressing part of the activity. [...] Less commonly, the wool is swallowed, even causing trouble.” This “bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown”, Winnicott continues, “is a defence against anxiety, particularly anxiety of the depressive type.” [3]

[We spend a lot of time, in the early days, tucking you and retucking you, so that you don’t pull your grandmother’s blanket over your face in your sleep].

In another of his case studies, often referred to as the ‘String Boy’, a child whose mother has disappeared for long periods in his early life, owing to her depression, starts to tie domestic objects together with string: “whenever they went into a room they were liable to find that he had joined together chairs and tables; and they might find a cushion, for instance, with a string joining it to the fireplace.” The same boy goes on to collect teddy bears which he arranges as a family and makes trousers for in acts of ‘careful sewing’.

- -

If you are so inclined, you can buy a babygro with the words “I totally destroyed a vagina” written on it. The Etsy description has it as “printed with care, 100% cotton”. It comes in seven colours.

- - -

What does it mean if you buy this for a mother as a gift? What would it mean for a mother to buy it for her baby to wear? Is this a brag? [The baby in the picture is smiling and toothy]. Whose vagina has this baby destroyed?

- - -

The “daddy stitch” [formerly known as the “husband stitch”] is the term given to when a surgeon adds an extra stitch into the perineum with the object of ‘tightening things up for the male partner’ following either an episiotomy or tear.

The word ‘stitch’ comes from the German for ‘prick’.

The word ‘perineum’ is a compound of the Greek words for ‘near’ and ‘carry off by evacuation’.

Why does everything send me back to Demeter and Persephone?

- - -

I think I hate crafts but, really, I only hate being watched whilst I’m doing them [memories of Textiles lessons at schools; pinning a curtain with my sister-in-law that will shield my birth space and feeling maladroit].

- - -

Have you noticed how many kids’ books describe a floppy object coming apart at the seams? The Velveteen Rabbit, for one, is ‘threadbare’ by the end of the book -

the cost, as the Skin Horse puts it, of becoming 'Real'. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt", the Horse tells the Rabbit.

- - -

Let's wrap this up.

- - -

In the South American ritual of 'closing the bones', the postnatal mother is bound in a special cloth [a 'rebozo'] from head to toe by one, or several women. The ritual is intended to return a woman back to herself following the unravellings of birth. One night, during lockdown, I attend an online self-wrapping workshop and I bind my head, hips, abdomen, solar plexus with a group of other women.

- - -

Every night, we tuck you in; every week there are more things knitted for you. I buy books about mothering/mother wounds/crafts that I don't read. I pick my crystals out of the soil. I fold things. I unfold things. I speak to my mother. I don't speak to my mother. I read Winnicott. I speak to my mother. You sleep, more often than not, in cobbler's pose. I try to make things. I try to wrap things up.