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Only Bad Mommies Eat Their Babies: American Motherhood, Myth and Tragedy

H. Landsel,
St. John's University, New York

There is the event. Language bends and breaks under the weight of it. Images carry the memory pain and easier on the outside of my body not the subconscious stored in abstracts but my artistic process speaks now that I can't in a painted image of thought that apprehends a multitude at work to which your response is a series of slashes to the face and a slow burn from a fire lit under your chin you see the impermanence of the body promises that when it's gone the memories scarification—a story cut into my hip two fetal skulls one mute asleep the other screaming but he is too young to voice the unstoppable loss of his mother from the tiny mouth a vine appears thorns leaves then buds mud roses cutting through my woman side defense against the outside. So written on me is my testimony before I find the sounds to utter.

There is a Cookoo in the academy. Perhaps I should tell you this upfront. Although I have appropriated the tools to speak in academic context, I find it necessary to drag myself out from under my inheritance - the tradition of female silence when considering subjective writing practices as a method of inquiry into the American sociocultural definition of writer/woman/mother. My intended subject is peskey and it insists upon a relationship with you readers - I engage you, I urge you towards a rizomatic view of my subject and the space I seek to claim inside the polemics of personal criticism. Experience and abstract must collaborate and with you I play a discursive game that pushes us towards better uses of this language - speech that sounds so fearful in this female mouth. We will re-story language until it pleads the necessity of lived experience as critical authority. I engage critically and I am critical and I continue to testify to lived experience both experimental and analytical I test the boundaries of multiple genres, I daresay the nature of this action in the present tense - I TEST, I AM - suggests that this is a working problem - *I am being written in process* - it is the process of language one must pay attention too - writing of the self portrait, the re-making of memory, and fiction working to synthesis a critical examination of culturally proscribed stigmas of mad woman/writer/mother. If my prose appear to bear the characteristics of an old and gendered debate - it is because they do.

Nevertheless, the topic of my experimental exploration here is the problem of representation of the episodic psychotic female mind. I insist that you follow me. There is murky silence - your misgivings towards my speaking subject are audible. The 1990s made some room for feminist occasional writing, personal criticism, and subjective singular voice but if one looks at the disciplines from which such women come, all are some way rooted in cultural and feminist studies - the red light district of our discipline. It seems that the last time the academy checked it was 1987 and Jane Tompkins was taken to task for forcing her private and personal life into existing authoritative academic discussions of feminist and cultural theory. It seems, in "Me and My Shadow," that Tompkins had to go to the bathroom and this embarrassed her colleagues both personally and professionally - she narrowly avoided having her head placed on a pike as a warning to other feminist scholars should they make the imprudent decision to suggest any evidence of material body - worse, the female body - positioned behind her discursive challenge. Wasn't this female subject just what feminist scholars were struggling to dismantle despite a long history that defined the speaking woman as emotional and therefore untrustworthy? If Jane Tompkins must go to the bathroom in public, not only is she marking the speaking female body's presence, she is identifying herself and her bladder as the voice and

locus of concern. Tompkins forces us from our disordered dissociative abstraction of female mind from female body - the female mind exists - it may speak (but not singularly) and the female body exists but the body is messy and must remain on the academy's doormat - who knows, she might track menstrual blood in on her shoes. Perhaps even more disconcerting than Tompkins citing herself as the subject that has to go to the bathroom is the demystification that the female scholar has to go at all. Thus undermining what little critical authority women and feminist scholars have achieved? Historically, misgivings about women's credibility have silenced subjective voice in the academy where truth telling as the possible work of women remains suspect. If Roland Barthes can *aller pisser* - but Tompkins may not, then we are simply making a gendered determination of who may speak of (essentially admit to having) a body behind the mind and who may not. It is the intrusion of women's will to make critical meaning from occasional writing, and memoir that once more challenges the lame rhetoric of gender politics and self representation. What about women's inherent deceitfulness, you ask? What about hormones that render the female subject irrational? What about her worth as a self representative subject?

The hysterical female archetype still haunts the academy - she lingers in our scholarly basements and I re-make her as your persistent problem by declaring that I am writer madwoman menstruating mother and I have the same grip on language and its representative authority as you have, dear reader.

Distrust in autobiographical intrusion into academic discourse requires the female scholar and critic to speak "as a..." in order to remain a tasteful distance from self representation - the possibility of speaking herself to life as the audible and visible female teller is dangerous. If the speaking subject speaks in representation of other women, she is permitted a small space in critical discourse but at best, she functions metonymically for herself and for the rest of her gender. You think not? What motivates you to exclude such a singular enigma from academic discourse? In understanding that such subjective writing forces a terrifying relationship between reader and the female I perhaps you fear recognizing yourself? Or are you masochist? No, voyeur? You watch aroused from within the collective American psyche that loves horror - hears and feels the titillation a woman's subjective textual event illustrates for you - violence, sexual abuse, incest or madness. You are aroused. Is it the transgressive rhetorical ground she stands on that excites you - this naughty subjective voice that teases you towards the margins of sanctioned academic discourse? Perhaps this poorly disciplined subject forces you to see her - see her materiality - her. Here is dangerous femaleness - her self declared discursive I forces you to confront her breasts,

hips and thighs her clitoris (perhaps that one is too hard to find) but you must see her vagina you acknowledge her uterus and ovaries - the fertile space that is capable of producing many more speaking subjects. And she is a terrifying. She is making a spectacle of herself - you say.

And so reader, I must complicate the problem of speaking subject. What shall we do with a woman who resists all rules of representation? A crazy woman cannot speak as her critical subject, nor can she write her representative self if she admits to psychotic episodes - episodes where she imagines she is someone else, episodes where voices talk to her, the Devil or God tells her to kill - to protect, to save humanity or to eradicate evil. Such a subject must not speak for herself. The reader fears recognition of self in her testimony. This madwoman scholar finds herself so far outside the limits of any reasonable academic sympathy that once again, she is suspect based on gender alone, never mind our mistrust in the medium she engages. This woman does not fit our culture's begrudging rules for women and autobiography. So motivated are we as readers by truth telling, that the madwoman is incapable of functioning as representative I for other speaking subjects nor can she work as metonym for her gender entirely since few if any admit to mental illness. This madwoman's scholarly contributions to her academic discipline are forever ignored as a father dismisses his overgrown stepchild when she embarrasses him at the company Christmas party. This woman rejects the structured project of self representation altogether - there is no order to her psychotic episodes. In essence, my project revives - must revive the same questions our sex has sought to put to rest time and time again: can a female scholar write from a unified identity of intellect/body—the sick body? Can we admit that there is a material speaker behind this voice - a singular voice that does not represent anyone other than her I and finally, can the woman that admits to fluid interchange between psychosis and sanity resist the stigma of emotional, hysterical, unsound female? Is a madwoman's autobiography even culturally and academically permissible? Is she even an appropriate subject? Perhaps even more troubling is the mythology of women and *Satan* inherent to my project of self representation.

Contemplate the epistemology of canonical thinking that yolks hysterical women with deception, and evil. Such women are figures in a long literary history of fairytales, folklore and witchery and that is where they stay according to dominant thought. These are weak fictions of women, spectacles of women who lie and lay with the Devil - didactic warnings to future generations against masturbation, adultery and bastardy. Like Arthur Miller's dancing, chanting nudes in the New England forest, my subject I tempts you to watch the creative excess of my imagination. Follow me into a secret community of women who speak to the Devil and to angels - where some do their

bidding and others escape. From the slough of dangerous subjectivity you must watch the terrible birth of the thing you fear most—female enunciatory I—text in hand this I crawls from the muck that conjured her. She points back in the direction from which she came and says, "There is place you are looking for." Reader, you are confused? Angry? Try as you might, you are unable to distinguish fiction from fact, criticism from subjectivity as it drips off the female I. Reader, you move to take my text and rip it open, analyze its organs, finger the long lengths of its bowel and declare it illegitimate writing before you hack into pieces female writing - site of your phallic curiosity - site of mystery and cultural taboo.

You hold the textual representation of this mother's body/speaking self.

Dear Eva,

I knew we had more in common than we first thought. Like you, PPP blindsided me. I was never depressed before - that or my church had another definition for this particular feeling - guilt ridden conscious. Fear is a terrible thing and nine months spent thinking I would lose my baby forced me to wonder where this idea was coming from. So much unaccessed memory from our childhood in the cult was translating into my fears of stillbirth. It seemed that women seemed to bury more babies than they gave live birth to - so many tiny coffins, my nephews part of the years of funeral processions - little graves clumped together within the cult's burial grounds. I can only attribute these deaths to sub standard obstetrical care - if not outright efforts towards population control but certainly not the will of God as we were brought up to believe. Cult women were not allowed to be women -

American culture suffers from a severe case of Mary Cassatt syndrome—let me explain. Look at any of Cassatt's myriad paintings Mother and Child, A Kiss for Baby Anne La Toilette, Mother Berthe Holding her Baby—stills of rubinesque women transfixed in the mother child tableau. Such images adorn the walls of maternity wards and one too many greeting cards. If Le Leche League was around at the turn of the century, Cassatt would have been their champion given the artists' insistence of American motherhood breast feeding her blond blue eyed child. Their cheeks are flushed in primary red that defies you to look closer - closer at fine cracks, muted layers underneath more paint - suggest Cassatt's mother is constructed on top of something more complex that American culture has hidden. Part of the iconographic furniture of American culture, A World

“He’s so
cute, don’t
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him?”

War II Liberty Ship is christened the SS Mary Cassatt. Her 1966 painting *The Boating Party* is reproduced on a US postage stamp and in May of 2009, the artist is honored by a Google logo in recognition of her birthday. From her celebrated status as an American Impressionist, she anthropomorphizes a romantic definition of American mother - nurturing, adoring, and self sacrificing. Mary Cassatt is either a teller of tall tales, childless, or paid off by remnants of the first settlers who marred these sunny shores—puritans and their abominable bibles who fled England and any reminder of their flesh and animal origins. Even without the Judeo Christian morality that is the foundation of American mores and legal precedent, most will agree that killing one’s newborn baby should go on the list of things only a bad mommy would do. This includes cannibalizing, microwaving, drowning, or smothering one’s baby. Women who are capable of such unspeakable acts are not mothers, they are not even women. Monster moms - certainly not like you waiting at the bus stop, picking up formula at the baby store or attending Gymboree classes. You are sure you have never seen a woman that is capable of infanticide much less cannibalism - you are not capable and you don’t know anyone who is. There is a wall between you and such beasts, they exist far outside your experience and only for as long as major news networks are willing to carry the story. Even these women’s names signify that they are outsiders to your

of God. The first time I saw a man weep was when he announced that his wife, my fifth grade teacher, had given birth to a dead boy. They named him anyway. Even if I had a reasonable explanation for why I feared stillbirth, even with the best obstetrical care, I saw no reason to think my baby would live. I thought If I can just get through this pregnancy I’ll have gotten away with something that I shouldn’t have and I’ll make sure I never have another baby. You know as well as I do that we’ve had more than our share of grief accompanying loss.

I didn’t want to hold my baby, didn’t want to rock him or sing to him the way I imagined I would. I wanted to dash his little head against the wall—kill him and kill myself. I didn’t know where this was coming from, I kept trying to “pick myself up” but I couldn’t. I was so afraid to tell my husband what I was thinking never mind that both of us came from the school of never-take-mood-altering-medication-therapy-is-not-for-people-like-us-depression-is-mostly-self-inflicted-Like you, I went to therapy and cried and left thinking how dumb the counselors were and wondered why it was such a big deal that my suicide method de jour was self immolation. I went to group therapy too and scared the shit out of those lovely ladies leaving me feeling completely alone and completely insane. I was still sure that my baby was going to die. It was just a matter of time. Maybe he would

perfect Mommy-dom - and so you imagine neonaticide and infanticide the socio-cultural trait of mothers quite unlike you. Otty Sanchez. She eats her baby. You are shocked. Disgusted. She eats his toes and some of his brains. You are nothing like this monster. You are Mother with a capital M.

To the detriment of any growth in collective cultural consciousness, we are indoctrinated by a false ideal of motherhood - ordered by a set of impossible rules and roles. This American mother constitutes happy mother -happy-to- be-mother. This cultural idyll embodies love and safety she wants to cradle her child, she must kiss and stroke him and bathe him after which she must compulsively smell her child and never leave his side. There are sounds and words that we associate with the mother. This maternal contrivance utters little nonsenses scripted by her cultural predecessors- “he looks like an angel,” “I can’t stop looking at him,” “Didn’t you just love him from the minute you saw him?” “He’s so cute, don’t you just want to eat him? I see the humor in the last remark even if you, reader, do not. Cassatt’s mothers answer in the affirmative, yes he’s an angel, yes he’s the cutest, and I can’t stop looking at him. These phrases are accompanied by a range of cooing and clucking sounds a happy mother knows. And there is another kind of American mother. Mothers who cannot speak baby speak or kiss their newborns. Mothers

live until Christmas? A placebo dose of Prozac and I have to dump all the breast milk I'd pumped down the drain. The baby is screaming - it must be from the SSRI in my milk. I cry and pour.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that much of the psychological trauma was from my upbringing in a cult—a life that I literally stopped living the day I ran away, and picked up living a different one the next day. I never dealt with the past and I rarely talked about it. I just figured the longer I was away from that church, the easier it would be to live normally. One night after therapy, I told my husband I was leaving him. Divorce please. As much as he made me so angry and as much as I blamed my husband for most of the pain I was in, he was patient - taking the night shift so I could curl into the fetal position, rock and cry - get away from the baby.

Like you said, nobody is willing to admit that post partum illness happens and often. It seems most women of our mothers' generation see PPMI as weakness. My mother eventually admitted to suffering from "terrible thoughts" that made her fear she was going insane after I was born.

- HL

who cannot touch their children, or worse, mothers who kill their children. Here is the imposter who does not fit our cultural, medical, or legal understanding of maternity. She is as confused as you are when she doesn't feel the anticipated rush of maternal feelings. She thinks she doesn't love the irritating creature the doctor says her uterus expelled. In fact, when everyone leaves the hospital room she sobs. Everyone is watching for signs of affection towards the child, watching and waiting. Such a mother might spread her lips toward a smile, she might nod in agreement when others exclaim how much the small intruder looks like his daddy. Such a mother begins to rehearse the maternal role she is cast - the part demands she play as if in earnest: feed him, burp him, change him, put him to bed. Feed him, burp him, change him put him to bed and if someone else is watching, stroke his head—do something to convince the others. Family members happily delude themselves that crying spells, loss of appetite, dramatic weight loss and insomnia are nothing more than symptomatic of the tough adjustment to motherhood: "oh, I cried every day," says my mother-in-law "this is normal." But I'm getting ahead of myself. January 2008. Henry is planned, charted, graphed, annotated, with footnotes. There were fluid tests, temperatures recorded, cervical length measured. I learned the pre baby conception language, ttc, bd dpo, cm,dh, dd, ds,

"Happy and sick."

the hopeful mother codes from the world of baby making. With the precision of a mad scientist - measure and squirt. Synthetic cervical fluid up the hoo-hoo each time my soon lagging partner bd'd. I read that egg whites inserted up the lady parts also help move the sperm towards the egg but one has to draw the line somewhere. I knew I had conceived - such a formal word - like I'm describing the Blessed Virgin: "she was conceived by the holy spirit" long before I peed on the early detection sticks. Happy and sick. The only thing that controlled my nausea - carbohydrates - the refined ones. You can see where this is going. My breasts inflated a cup size or three and I was forced into maternity clothes early. Very early. Waiting online at the Pharmacy with both hands gripping an XL bag of Peanut M & Ms, I forced my stomach out like I often do after dinner - and when women asked "about five months?" I would nod and blush. Sure, five months - since I've eaten a green vegetable. A few days ago I was kicking things out of my way in the basement and I came across what looked like twin bathtubs. It was my maternity bra.

So occupied charting fetal movements in the final weeks before my due date, I hardly noticed the signs of pre-eclampsia that brought me to the hospital - a high risk specialist came to see me and suggested the best course of action was to deliver the baby early - my blood pressure was too high. But my regular

My mother hordes food even though the boys and I haven't eaten in days. Then takes bread from its hiding place, mounds sugar on top of the butter and crams it into her mouth, unaware that she's chewing as she slices off the next piece until there is nothing left. We are on our knees. We beg. I shush the little boys and ask her for just one. She points the tip of her knife towards me. I know not to move, not to breath. The knife dips down and she scrapes whats left of the loaf off. Just one slice and I give it to the three year old and the five year old. So much bewilders me about life in the mountains, but not my mother and not this. She doesn't mean us any harm.

Sometimes a child senses the end of something before she has the language to explain it. Mother shooed us out of the house one day - clutching her middle and moaning like the heavy ewes before lambing. There was no time to call out for anybody to come help, and so we sat, our hands over our ears, wondering when she'd let us back inside. Terrible sounds escape the house - my mother's screams - so long but one after another that the echoes against the side of the mountain sustain - her voice like its the first and last sound I will ever hear. Screen door flaps open and closed - mother drags herself across the yard, darkening a crimson swath through the grass. No one cut it since Father took off. On her hands and knees, mother claws at the earth, scraping

obstetrician and even the specialist's partner dug in their heels at the idea of such an early delivery. Another high risk specialist, a pompous man in a three piece suit complete with the bedside manner of an orangutan, suggested that my blinding headaches were the result of hypoglycemia. You must remember by this time, I am a beached whale run aground on the third floor of the hospital. Surrounded by food, there is acid in my voice when I challenged Dr. Suit to look at me and tell me honestly if I could be hypoglycemic or, for that matter, suffering from a lack of food at all? He discharged me that morning. The c-section was easy. The spinal didn't hurt at all and by the time I was catheterized and the forest of pubic hair buzzed away, I felt calm. I made a half hearted apology to the nurse who was busy sweeping my pubes off the table and then there was tugging and pressure. I watched the surgery reflected in the overhead light. There was a smell I didn't recognize and I asked what it was. When the doctor didn't answer, I realized it was the smell of my cauterized flesh. My abdominal wall is forced apart - I want to say that this maneuver was done with something that looked an awful lot like a giant shoe horn but I run the risk of being wrong - it might have just been the drugs making me loopy. My husband stood up and took pictures as the not so little boy was extracted from my uterus. When the baby cried, a few tears

out a hole no bigger than a young raccoon. She buries something under the dogwood tree and it is evening before mother stops crying and her voice turns to whimpers as she rocks on her knees by the window that looks out at the rusted trunk of a '37 Dodge. Swaying she prays for deliverance. She clasps her skirt in agitation. I'd never seen a grown woman cry before. "She's sick" the minister said. "I need you Lord," she wails on "I need to feel you Lord. Why are you so far from me?" She is a wounded doe, so vulnerable after birth, so full of pain but I just stand and watch her rock. The minister catches her from the day lilies planted by the back stoop. Chickens tutt and scratch as she raises her arms toward something I cannot see, "I'm so lonely." How is such a thing possible? I try to heal her as I often do the little boys when they step on pricklers or lick their fingers and touch the water pump in winter - strips of an old cotton apron torn and wrapped round the wound. But I can not find this wound - instead the sheriff takes her away. "Crazy," "batty," "insane" mutter the black clad church members from their pews and I wonder if the sickness will come to me? If I fall asleep, will the mountain fever snatch me up as it did my mother? I try to stay awake, but drowsiness lullabied me to sleep—the sweet evening air of May shushing me the way it shushed the lilacs - pale. When I was eighteen, I visited my mother in the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum. I asked

dripped out of my eyes but there was no rush of warmth or any of the emotion I expected. The nurse brought Henry over to me. I couldn't touch him. The nurse placed him in my husband's arms - alive - and I waited for some rush of relief, tangible feeling to indicate the fear and anxiety retreating. But nothing happened. The baby looked a little purple and his breathing didn't seem normal to me. I kept looking at him and asking out loud, is he ok, why is he breathing like that? The anesthesiologist was still rummaging behind me but the neonatologist, who stood at the ready to take over if the baby showed any signs of distress, called out "congratulations, you have a healthy boy" and the OR doors swung shut behind her. I should have been relieved - the baby was fine despite the less desirable outcomes the head of Neonatology warned us of. I remained unsettled - not because my uterus didn't contract right away and I began to hemorrhage - bandage dark and black with blood which brought doctor running. Something else felt wrong.

My husband came back downstairs, after photographing Henry's first bath, but following him was a resident I'd never seen. From my bedside, I heard her say things like "NICU" and "trouble breathing," "fluid," or "infection." I know I gave her the filthiest look I could summon - as if it were her fault that my baby was sick. Wheeled out of the OR, the orderlies brought me past the NICU as

her to explain what happened. She said she needed to rest first but then she would tell me. She didn't want me to end up like her.

Thirty three years ago I buried my last child under the dogwood tree - the one front of the house.

they were told. A nurse came out and said they were having trouble getting an IV started - the baby wasn't easy access so they were going to try again but this time on his head. Face to face with my child for the first time. Terror. The boy was crying and covered in monitors and wires. I stuck my finger out towards his hand - it seemed the right thing to do - something a mother would do. My husband looked like he was going to throw up. A nurse barked NICU protocol and gave us directions and thick information packets. I saw the child for less than fifteen minutes before the orderlies wheeled me to maternity. My husband could stay with the baby as long as he liked and I begged him to stay. Someone had to watch over the little boy. I couldn't sleep, I called down to the NICU at 3:00 am - is "Henry ok?" I needed to know—had the baby died? The nurse assured me they were sending out labs - we would know more later in the day.

There are huge gaps in my memory from those first three days. I cried at night and each morning a resident on rounds would ask me why I was crying and was I having thoughts about hurting myself or my baby? I paced the hallways hour after hour. The night nurses barely noticed me. Confused. I make excuses when the nurses ask - must be hormones and when pressed, I tried to articulate how it felt to carry a child in my uterus one moment only to have him ripped out of me in such a hurry and without warning. I

"On other days I planned my own hanging from the ornamental cherry in my front yard."

thought I was sad because my son was in the NICU and I was upstairs. I tried to nurse the baby. From the effort of trying to latch on, his breathing became irregular and his skin turned blue. A nurse whisked the baby away. Then it was just me, alone with the pump. Attach the industrial grade vacuum to my nipple. Right. Nothing comes out. I can't fill the little test tube screwed to the machine and now I understand why rubber nipples on baby bottles are as big as they are. Pumping gives me something to do.

And then you want to kill your child. You think you can't You say you would rather die you can't even picture what it would look like for your baby to die You must be a GOOD mother The RIGHT kind of mother Only beasts kill their children I join the living dead who see their children die again and again. Blood against white wall Blood against white wall Blood against white wall Blood against white wall Blood against white wall Spatters

On other days I planned my own hanging from the ornamental cherry in my front yard.

I had lost so much already, three babies and your father, I couldn't understand how a person could lose much more and live to take it. That mountain was just waiting to take my last baby. Land that couldn't grow nothing. I knowed suffering was part of being alive—the bible says so, but there are times when a person doesn't want to feel pain no more.

I was frightened and it pushed my baby right out of me. He wasn't due until apple picking, but I laid down and let God take him away from me. I was done fighting. Cows gave birth and the mountain let them keep their young. What had I done? I was hearing voices, the hemlocks, and the wisteria vines were poking fun at me. Telling me to take the squalling little boy and save him from the mountain. I couldn't let my baby lay there—him gasping for air like a fish the boys caught up the stream. What kind of mother was I to let a baby live when the winters or the mines would kill him in the end. I smothered him. He was safe now, in heaven where there'd be no hurting the way I was. I saved him and the trees stopped talking. I slung three ropes from the center beam in the house, one for each of you kids and one for me. The minister told me I'm a murderer that I would burn in hell with Satan.

I will take the boy with me I can't leave him here His headstone is gigantic - too big for such a tiny child His name - his long name is carved deep in the grey stone not granite or marble Each letter of his name I am afraid to speak it even language suffers from poverty that renders it unable to meet trauma's monstrosity Nursery inverse that's clever This little piggy wants to die in the bathtub, this little piggy slits her wrists, this little piggy wants to hang herself and this little piggy has a gun and this little piggy wants to swallow all her Zanax Prozac and Ambien when she gets home I am monstrous deserve this I must have done something I believe in language It is the one indestructible medium I once declared myself and often Not this time I recite and rock while the baby naps in his cradle "turning and turning in the widening gyre" turning turning a gigantic angel watches me from the foot of my bed I should be reassured but this angel is dressed in black waiting without the red eyes my mother warned me demons have I wake and watch a woman levitate above the armoire is she dead Her hands are folded against her breast unnaturally the work of a mortician postmortem don't bury me with makeup on The first time I saw the public service infomercial I thought it was graphic but at least parents would learn not to co-sleep with their newborns But I am in the ad the tinkling music mobile plays Brahms' Lullaby like the one

I bought my son The baby's hand is protruding from under a heavy quilt Asleep I roll over on top of the infant. He flails and then twitches and then nothing.

Language abandoned me. If I kept secret the gruesome image of my child's brains running down the wall, perhaps without utterances to signify my thoughts, they didn't exist. Nobody will know what a monster I am. Visual and auditory hallucinations - these I have spoken of to my husband and now that he knows what I'm seeing isn't real, I'm afraid he'll try to lock me up. I shake the car keys in his face and promise I'll run away before he commits me for psychiatric evaluation. He paces the back yard. Kicks frozen dog turds. Talks on his cell phone with our Dr who assures my husband that my mind is playing tricks - nothing more. He should watch me closely - the MSW who specializes in Post Partum Mood Disorders calls - remove anything that might be used for self destructive purposes. If your wife has a plan to kill

herself, she is smart enough not to tell. Things were so much worse than wanting to die - I lost the ability to speak. Absent an appropriate language to convey my interior state, I suffered under people around me as they applied their limited language to circumstance they were sure they recognized: "she's just having a tough time adjusting to motherhood - everyone is emotional after they have a baby - you must be sleep deprived - it's just baby blues you'll feel better after you take a shower" the women around me echo age old assumptions that women's reproductive events render all women emotional and to the same degree. "You're selfish, how could you dump your baby on me" this from the baby's grandmother after I rang her door bell quite sure that I was going to smash the baby like a watermelon if I was near him another minute. Post Partum Depression, Post Partum Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Post Partum Anxiety Disorder, PTSD and Post Partum Psychosis. I have since learned that there are varying levels of PPP which explains my visual hallucinations without hearing the phone calls from Satan that other women with PPP describe.

Light myself on fire.

The idea seemed realistic enough—the only part I hadn't worked out was if my husband and tiny son should come with me, or stay—better off without me. Drive every day, get out of the house, get out, out, out, get IT out. I don't know what it is—if I did would I want to die so badly? The parkway pylons. Far left lane. Tempting to die on concrete at this speed. We will die. I should leave him in the Starbucks parking lot—leave him in his car seat, that way he isn't in danger. I fixate on fire.

Of course it would be painful—I'm not stupid, but I will douse myself in accelerant and light a match. I can see my body alight, arms outstretched---twirling, twirling, and free. When my husband interrupts these racing thoughts, I pour the accelerant on him too and I watch him alight. If I don't remember how it started it isn't important. I will die. Green and white plaid pajamas and flame eats away at the shirt hem, then up higher. Maybe I found a match? The lighter from the stove? I don't know. Smokier than I thought it would be, less color so much in black and white and smoke. There's orange! First a glimpse then

Burn pretty fire

and then more, more, more first eating away, brown, to glow then
and to flame—orange flame, yellow
turns to white hot wings that will lift me when I have died from
his loss of language—the inexpressibility I am. I paint fire from my fingertips.
Fire travels down leg and up hair, the top of my head is caught in uproarious yellow
that crackles in my ears, licks down my back to the bottoms of my tennis shoes.

Hush little baby - fire follows me dancing and greedily bites at my arms. Someone who could feel would feel this - would hang her tongue out and scream for all the mercy and salvation that is owed her. I should sit, someone in pain might sit now. Naughty fire, little tufts like dandelions are bursting through my shirt in patches, soon the buttons, and pockets disappear and all I'll see is magnificent flame. *Burn harder.*

Fire make me feel, promise to take me to my baby.

I want to see my baby. Too much smoke - a choking hand to silence the utterances of a mother who wants to die, die in pain. Don't keep me from my boy, my tiny son - where is my son? Whoever drinks by moonlight clear, will live a thousand years... **MIS FOR MURDERER, O T H E R, I HAVE LOST MY LANGUAGE.** Panicked by the strange loss of place and personhood, my emotional and intellectual dislocation is terrifying. I can't scoop myself up, dust myself off as I always have in the past and worse, my fractured thinking makes it impossible to know what is rational and irrational behavior. Imagine the shock when you - YOU find yourself walking to the kitchen - you want a knife. You want one of the knives from the wooden block on the counter. Grey formica chipped by the dog. Black handled knives. Even the bread knife will do. I would slit both their throats—the boy and his grandmother. *Then all this would be over.*

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"The Devil told her to do it I'll say the devil! Only evil makes a mother do that to her child" We should be embarrassed by the mythology of Satan, heaven and hell she just summoned. The definition of Psychosis should explain why a woman like Otty Sanchez and countless other women, explain the act of infanticide as prompted by the voice of the devil in her head. You insist we need to believe there is a devil. Without these religious binaries, how will we determine who is good and who is better than?

As a society we understand that such things as mental illness exist, we accept schizophrenia as a real illness - we treat them, sometimes we hospitalize them or even institutionalize them but we recognize the severity of such a diagnosis. We know that any break with reality is detrimental to our health and the wellbeing of others, we medicate for depression, we medicate for anxiety, we medicate for Obsessive Compulsive behavior, insomnia, eating disorders and any other dis-ordering symptoms that disrupt our cultural concept of normal. But we have yet to acknowledge motherhood as a potentially grave illness that threatens her life and her child's. Mourning headlines. My husband tells me not to look at the newspaper but I have seen the front page: *WOMAN CANNIBALIZES INFANT SON, POLICE SAY* - I'm sick to my stomach for a moment - poor woman. I don't have to read the rest of the article, the outraged calls for the death penalty and the disbelief that a mother could do such a thing to her child. If I've seen the same headlines year after year then so have you - Mother suffocates infant, Mother microwaves baby, etc.

I look over at my husband who is watching to see how I'm going to react to the day's cover story - "she must have been sick." Even from this rancid bit of crap journalism - this attempt to disgust readers and yet titillate that part of the human consciousness that violence and gore arouse - I can pick out the signs of post partum mental illness - probably depression and psychosis. The baby's father wants this mother tried as a monster. At this last detail, this afterthought at the bottom of the article, my chest tightens and my eyes tear the way they do before an angry outburst. "How can he be so STUPID?" I mutter something about ignorant Texan men but I know this isn't a place or gender specific ignorance. As news of the 33-year-old Texas woman who murdered her infant son and then ate bits of his brain and a few toes, our curiosity and cultural lust for the grotesque is peeked. The story of Otty Sanchez taps deep historical veins as it conjures recognizable literary themes of love, loss, female madness, infanticide, cannibalism, and the historic battle between good and evil. So close does it resemble other canonical tragedies where parental aberrations

lend a simple plot with simple motives, we might title such a story *Motherhood out of Wedlock: A Cautionary Tale*—a young mother in poor health, breaks with her lover shortly after giving birth to their firstborn. Frail, and grief stricken, the abandoned lover loses her mind. Quite insane, she hears voices telling her to kill her baby. After murdering the infant, she consumes parts of him and thus in a final act of reckoning she claims the baby as her own body and blood for all eternity. She stabs herself in the heart and slashes her throat in an attempt to dispatch herself from the earth. As fiction, the plot twist is a cruel joke that lets the mother live despite her suicide attempts. As literature and art, the Sanchez story fits neatly into our literary canon: God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham obeys but Isaac is given a last minute reprieve. Medea kills her two sons to punish Jason for leaving her. Hansel and Gretel are abandoned by irresponsible parents who leave the children vulnerable to an old hag who planned to eat more than their brains and toes.

Details of the Otty Sanchez incident disrupt our tidy narrative. Off her medication, Sanchez was in counseling for postpartum depression but there were signs that it was worsening. Sanchez and her boyfriend separated when the baby was three weeks old. Sanchez, possibly experiencing the onset of a psychotic break, sought help in a local hospital emergency room but was released in less than 24 hours and sent home to care for her newborn. She heard voices that told her to kill the baby. She gave the baby to her sister, who shares the house with her; she did not want the child near her. The sister returned the baby to his mother when she appeared calm again. Sanchez killed the baby, tried to kill herself. Our analysis of a seemingly linear plot is run aground. She no longer belongs alongside canonical parents, Medea and Abraham. Rather, her story points to our cultural disregard for motherhood and mental health. Indeed, the Sanchez narrative fits better among nonfiction mothers like Susan Smith, the North Carolinian who drove her two boys into a lake in 1994. Andrea Yates, the Texas mother who drowned her five children in the family bathtub in 2001. Or, Banita Jacks, the mother who killed her four children in 2008 and lived with their decomposing bodies for months in her D.C. apartment. Sanchez is the most recent name on a long list of American killer moms who make titillating reading but soon disappearing from sight. These mothers are not part of our humanity—the inherent goodness of motherhood separates us from monster moms.

As long as collective American culture pathologizes women like Otty Sanchez as non-woman—evil by her unthinkable act of infanticide and cannibalism we need never question the social underpinnings that insist on this cultural fiction. If we treat these women as exceptions to the rule of American motherhood we are excused from asking what creates such circumstances in the first place. These

mothers must remain the exception in order to continue dedication to an American discourse of normative motherhood, makes us feel safe knowing that within these cultural boundaries, we are incapable of infanticide. On the contrary a mother will do anything to protect her child which begs the complicated question, if this aberration of motherhood, in her mental illness thinks she is in fact, protecting her baby from the grasp of the devil or hell. How do we understand such impulses to save one's baby? Our deep seeded fear of evil and the pervasive notion that that Devil is not a moral authority convinces us that no good mother could kill. *Misguided love makes a mother kill*. I felt like a terrible mother, but nobody would raise my son the way he deserved and he needed a mother. It was my job to protect him from suffering the way I had suffered and what if I hurt him I couldn't bear it better he die now I hardly know him I don't love him and it will be ok again. I don't want to kill him but I don't think I can stop myself.

To be clear, women with PPP do not want to kill their children and this must be distinguished from having such intrusive thoughts without the ability to understand where the thoughts are coming from or how she ought to cope with them. A mother's instinct to protect her child forces her to think she has to kill but she does not want to cause harm. She believes her child is Satan therefore she is killing Satan or she believes the world into which her child is born is to cruel and so she kills to protect the child from pain. Even if a mother later testifies in court that she wanted to kill her child, she speaks from an absence of feeling or the sense that something else controls her thoughts and actions.

There is no universal agreement in the United States legal treatment of mental illness. Rather, our legal process is rife with bias's and a long standing stigma against women and women with mental illness. Our legislative masochists perpetuate gender bias and agenda ridden District Attorneys try these cases at the behest of their constituents' moral leanings rather than scientific data. Worse, there is no mention of Post Partum Mood Disorders or Post Partum Psychosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM, IV)*—the standard handbook in psychiatric illness that U.S. courts rely upon for official diagnosis of recognized mental illness. Absent from the DSM, courts may bar mention of the term postpartum psychosis or any illustration that the mother's act and state of mind are consistent with other women who suffer from the same documented symptoms. Instead we persist in our dark age and allow our culture's self proscribed morality to determine decisions of the court. Such a monster should burn in hell. The effect on judgment is the same as ordering juries that Post Partum illness does not exist. Courts continue to treat these mothers as pariahs among decent women and therefore medically and legally, we lack sufficient language to identify and diagnose Post Partum illness. The tragic consequences are homicide, infanticide,

suicide. PPMD is something that legislators in thirty other countries, including Australia, England and Canada, have long understood. In 1938, England passed the Infanticide Act, which automatically reduces a mother's murder of her infant to a manslaughter charge understanding much better than the U.S. that mothers like Sanchez are acting within a twisted reality over which they have no control.

Reader, if what I write does not fall with the margins of scholarly expectation I apologize but halfheartedly since there is no precedent set in my discipline for such a woman to speak for herself lest she risk being labeled "emotional" or accused of "making a spectacle out of herself." When I set out to think about autobiographical writing and even more problematic, women and mental illness, from a critical and scholarly viewpoint I faced a multitude of discursive problems. Not only am I woman and therefore by definition lacking an authoritative language to identify myself in the first person, there still exists the dissociation between critical mind and material body. Since subjective writing must come from the experience of a body, a gendered body marked by its sociocultural origins and by extension the emotional and therefore dismissed voice of the female from the academy, how can I possibly address my readers as a credible scholarly voice if I am by my own admission a woman, a writer, a mother and occasionally mad? I tell you within the unspoken experiences of women, the forced privacy - silence and the absence of language without which the self cannot be constructed - here is violence. A discursive violence that constitutes irrevocable psychological harm to its subject. The deepest trauma is in denying women access to language beyond - she is forced to store the substance that makes meaning and critical argument to everything she writes outside of the privacy of our memories. What I have written here is the story of survival in order that I can begin the work of first person witness. My story begins this way...

The truth is, I didn't like my newborn son. He was cute, I knew that - he did usual newborn baby things... That's all. I waited - the love, the indelible bond that my sociocultural upbringing said I ought to express towards my child - nothing. I felt nothing.

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The Whole Life of the Poet: William Carlos Williams and His Bicultural Heritage

Jenny R. Sadre-Orafai,
Kennesaw State University

Jenny Sadre-Orafai writes both poetry and prose. Her first chapbook, *Weed Over Flower*, was chosen for publication by Finishing Line Press. Her poetry has appeared in or is forthcoming in: *Wicked Alice*, *Lily*, *can we have our ball back?*, *FRIgg*, *Plain-songs*, *Literary Mama*, *Poetry Midwest*, *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Caesura*, *Gargoyle*, *Ouroboros Review*, *h_ngm_n*, and other fine journals. Sadre-Orafai's prose has appeared in *Rock Salt Plum* and in the *Seal Press* anthology: *Waking Up American*. She currently serves as poetry editor for *JMWW* and is an Assistant Professor of English at Kennesaw State University.