Where the Tiny Things Are: Feathered Essays
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Distracted Parents of the Micromanagement Era

Rebecca

“My gallery is showing the cool kids now. I am definitely not one of the cool kids. They think I’m a mom.”

“You are a mom. Do they have a cool moms show?”

“They definitely do not have a cool moms show.”

“You just painted Madonna wrapped in Christmas lights. What kind of mom would paint that?”

“What kind indeed?”

This was later, after her third child died thirty-six hours after her birth and her fourth child had been rushed from the Santa Monica hospital to the Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. After that child lived and after that child came home and after that child survived a whole winter season without contracting RSV—the respiratory infection that would have sent her back to Children’s. Back to the vent.

Before the after: Rebecca sat on the edge of the full-size bed her six-pound daughter lay upon. The daughter needed the whole bed, not for her size, but for her ventilator. Called a high frequency ventilator, or a jet ventilator, this mechanical ventilator uses a respiratory rate greater than four times the normal breathing, about 150 breaths per minute at very small tidal volumes. High frequency ventilation reduces lung
injuries like hypoxemia and widespread capillary leakage. The sound is similar to a small jet engine preparing for takeoff. I have been here for one hour and already I have had no thoughts except, “get me out of here, get me out of here.” Rebecca has been here for four months. I wonder if the sound of the jet has pummeled all the thoughts out of her.

Rebecca is a better mother than I am. When my daughter Zoe was in the hospital, I snuck in wine. I snuck in work. I graded papers and wrote book reviews. I am not a singular thinker. Rebecca is. She sells a single painting for more than I make in one year but here she is, not painting. Not working. She is not knitting. Not watching TV. Not reading a book. She looks at her daughter, Andi. “Her skin looks kind of pale, doesn’t it?”

Her skin actually looks kind of red, the same color red as when Zoe was in the NICU, having been born too early, like Andi, and her skin not ready for the dry world. Her skin, like Andi’s, should have remained in the wet world. But I don’t know what Andi looked like yesterday. I just got here. Rebecca leaves me alone with the jet and the baby, who has a kind of pulmonary edema and maybe a hundred other problems, so she can talk to the doctor. I force myself to stare at her skin to see if it changes color, but I’m already looking at the monitors, at the TV, at my phone. I will do anything to get out of here, even if my body stays.
Rebecca comes back with the doctor who, like me, cannot judge Andi’s pallor. Rebecca is the painter. She knows color. The doctor looks away from Andi and looks at Rebecca, listing a whole new array of possible diseases Andi may have. Like me, the doctor doesn’t want to focus. She wants to duck into the escape of her brain and demonstrate how diagnostic, how associative, how fully connected all these dots of information may be.

“I think we should turn down the vent,” Rebecca suggests. She’s not the doctor but she’s the only one paying attention.

Later, a different doctor comes in. “We turned down Andi’s vent.”
“Good, thanks.” Rebecca nodded.
“And then we noticed her sats stayed up.” *Sats* mean oxygen saturation, I knew from Zoe’s NICU stay.
“That is also good.”
“We think we’re going to take her off the vent tonight.”

I jump up to give Rebecca a hug. Finally. After four months. She’s going to be free. But Rebecca has a different patience. She looks at Andi’s skin. “We’ll see how her color stays.” Rebecca can paint an entire eight by twelve-foot canvas one day and, upon returning to the studio the next, “wipe the whole thing clean and start over.” She is a doctor of pallor and patience. She can decide when to take Andi off the vent.
Sarah

In the visitor room, sitting across from him, only the first time since he’d been sentenced, Sarah put a notebook between her and her dad. He was in minimum security. No bars. No glass walls. So paper was all she could use to protect herself. She asked him the questions in the most journalistic type manner.

“Did you say you’d hurt her if she told?”
“Sarah, I am so sorry.”
“Is it youth? Or is it power?”
“Sarah. Please forgive me.”
“Do you feel you perpetrated your offenses because offenses were perpetrated against you?”
“Sarah. I am sorry.”
“Did you ever think about me, Dad?”

Neither of them knows if she means as one of his victims or as his daughter who now lives without her dad.

Sarah researched counselors who work with sex offenders. She once told me that the counselors themselves have a hard time telling others what they do. Almost as outcast, their puerile jokes are understood as letting off steam. Bananas and too-small holes in donuts. Sarah picks her notebook up and writes the joke
Michelle

She isn’t usually called to crises anymore. As Arizona Domestic Violence Fatality Assessor, she arrives after the fact. She meets with the DA and the local police, the FBI, social services, domestic violence shelters, and victim witness programs to figure out what went wrong, where social services might have intervened earlier. But this day, her previous boss Myra was out on a call and Mark the FBI guy had her number on speed dial and called her. There had been a shooting. Kids were at the home. Could she come talk to them?

Michelle has her own kids. They are my kids’ ages. Both boys, they have longish wavy hair. Zoe and Liam play walkie-talkies. They build houses of mud for roly polies even though Michelle and I object to that name. “They are potato bugs,” we argue. They shake their heads. “Roly poly.” Our power as parents is incredibly limited. All four children like pizza. Liam and Ian only like cheese pizza. Max and Zoe only like pepperoni. Ordering two pizzas is influence as we have. When I tell them to quit jumping on the bed, they jump more quietly. I despair. Michelle tells them to jump outside. They find puddles. We shake our heads and hide out on the deck.

How much influence? She arrives at the scene. Two kids in regular Superman and Spiderman T-shirts sit on a regular picnic table and eat
regular M&M’s that the police officer who watched them gave them while they waited for Michelle who will stall until Social Services shows up.

“Hey, I’m Michelle,” she tells the kids. She gives them a wave. “You guys doing OK?” Michelle has the most soothing hello. She tilts her head. She smiles until her dimples crack. Everyone she meets wants to move into those dimples and stay there. They are happy and sweet. Better than M&M’s. The kids slide over to make room for her.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” she tells them.

She doesn’t gloss over anything. Their mom has just been taken away by ambulance. Their dad has just been taken away by police. “I want you guys to put this image in your head. Do you remember when your mom took you to the park?”

The kids nod.

“Picture her making your dinner. What’s your favorite dinner?”

“Macaroni and cheese.”

“Does she add extra cheese?”

Both kids nod.

“I do that with my kids too. Lots of extra cheddar.”

The mom may not make it, Mac had told her. Michelle thinks about the Spiderman gloves her son Ian gave her as she left him at preschool. “These will catch your dreams,” he tells her. Her only dream is this mom lives. She would like to please not assess a fatality, not this day. When the
county social worker shows up, Michelle gets up from the picnic table, tells the boys to remember to picture their mom talking on the phone, tucking her hair behind her ear, drawing around their hands to make turkeys at Thanksgiving. She tells the social worker they like mac and cheese. She thinks hard about her son. His Spiderman gloves. How red they are. Great lines of black interweaving stripes. Even a little rubber on the palm-side for traction. These are great gloves. Very great gloves, she thinks. She puts them on, turns on her car, and drives toward home.

Manuel

Manuel follows the farm manager out to see the cherries. He has been gone from the farm since March. He had heard about the destruction. From the airplane, he had seen the damage. Where there were once only canopies of coffee leaves, now he could see the ground. Half the plants that still had leaves were yellowed. His green green Ahuachapan now an autumnal New England. During the Civil War it had been bad. The army had torched some coffee farms to rout out the guerrillas. But then, so had the FMLN. For them, coffee was the problem. The rich 2% owned the plantations. The other 98% worked them. Or worse, didn’t. Extreme poverty drives people to extreme farming. Anti-farming. Burning down the house you live in doesn’t seem like a bad idea if your house is made out of cardboard. Most of this was before Manuel’s time. He inherited the coffee farm from his parents. A few acres here, another few acres there.
The coffee he grows in the lowlands, he sells to local coffee mills—big enterprises. Some of the plants are resistant. He takes a seedling from one of the resistant plants to the greenhouse, packs the dirt around it with two praying hands.

The rust *Hemileia vastatrix* is a fungus that likes water but isn’t water dependent. It likes the tropics. It likes Central America. It likes South America. The only America it doesn’t like is maybe North, but it even has a little bit of love for Mexico. Manuel lives in Flagstaff, Arizona. It’s hard to keep check on a fungus that lives on the other side of the equator—especially a fungus that loves warm temperatures.

The fungus has always existed. Kept in check by some coffee plants’ natural resistances and by climate, the fungus was chronic but not lethal. But as the temperatures click up, the fungus has begun to decimate plantations. In the past five years, temperatures have risen from an average of twenty to twenty-five degrees Celsius in the summer to twenty-six to twenty-eight. Two degrees Celsius turns a chronic fungus into a deadly one. What was once nearly impenetrable wall-to-wall green is now a walkable park. Or perhaps, more appropriately, a cemetery. Fungus-ridden plants droop like decaying flowers left behind on Memorial Day—no grave-tender to bury them. Thick vines and branches tip like uneven headstones. It doesn’t make you want a cup of coffee. It makes you want a big glass of wine. Maybe whole bottles of
it. Perhaps this is the beginning of the end. Perhaps this is the end of the end. Perhaps this is the problem. We want to wait and see how bad things will get. Rubberneckers, we are. It’s so exciting, this world-ending. Except it’s hard to get excited when there’s no coffee to drink.

Sarah

Paper. She was eight when he was convicted and sent tell anyone where her father was or why he was there. Her mother at working twelve-hour days at the bank, she walked the seven blocks from school to the library every day. The only person walking in downtown Phoenix. The only person with secrets so big she had to tuck it under her armpit, stuff it into her backpack, and slip it into her pocket. It went everywhere she did. Even into the library.

That’s where it started. The secret spilling out. She drenched the library with it. All that paper sopping up a secreting secret. Her dad should not have put his finger there. So, instead, she put kept her mouth shut but her pen open. Her dad wouldn’t confess so she became a writer and confessed for him. On the back of that paper, she flooded his secret. Her dad had his own underworld. In another letter from a man who she once called her father now she calls Bill because now he was paper and she could fold him in her wallet and keep him tucked away. It was clean paper she wanted. The librarian gave her sheaf after sheaf but what she really wanted was sheath. She was the knife. The library, her sheath.
Dangerous with secret. Bubbling over with possibility. She loved the librarian as much as she loved her father who she once knew and now foreigned. She wrote to him like you would write to an ambassador from China. Dear China, please don’t drive cars. We need to stop this global warming. Dear Dad, please keep your fingers out of little girls. Dear Brazil, we really need your forests, please don’t chop them down. Dear Dad, please come home and be a different person. Dear India, could you please clamp down on that ocean polluting? Dear Dad, could I please have a dad named Bill?

We all write letters on the off chance that the impossible can be made real. Type it in a library. Make the paper bear our burdens and change the world. Or at least the names.

Manuel

Manuel’s daughter Ella has just returned from El Salvador. She is as beautiful an eighteen-year-old as I have ever seen, plus, she is shorter than me so I am bound to like her. As I’m talking with Manuel about the great glut of 1996 when Vietnam started exporting coffee beans and coffee that had been selling for twelve dollars a pound sold for $2.54 a pound. Ella’s busy uploading pictures of her trip but when I ask Manuel how long he’s away from Flagstaff and in Costa Rica, she says, “Five months. From November to March. Every year.”

“Do you come back for Christmas?” I ask.
Manuel shakes his head no.
“Do you guys go down?” I ask Ella.
“No, it’s too expensive. We have school.”

I wonder which is more prescriptive—the Flagstaff Unified School District or this farm under attack from this fungus. Manuel has to go back to Ahuachapan. His farm has survived the Civil War. It has survived Vietnam. It has survived privatization and threats of communalization. But this fungus. It takes a whole father away from his whole family for almost half the year. No one seems too sad about it. That’s life. They adjust. I can’t imagine being away from Erik and my kids that long but I have an addictive personality. I don’t dream of a fungus corroding all my parents ever worked for. I stay home, fungus free.

Michelle drives to Phoenix once a week. She stopped smoking a long time ago, but now she is in the car so long, the window so crackable, the radio so singalongable, full of the fleeting feeling that she doesn’t have a care in the world, including dying, she can’t help but smoke.

Michelle never tells anyone what she does—it invites too many questions, involves too many secrets unveiled. She asks my friends when she’s over for a barbecue, oh what do you do, what do you do? She deflects with generalities—I’m a social worker so she doesn’t have to explain she has a job with the words “fatality” or “domestic violence” in its title.
When she gets to Sierra Vista, just south of Phoenix, she meets with Mark the FBI agent and the DA and the woman from Children and Family Services. They open the file to a pile of pictures of a woman bruised from head to toe.

“It looks like she’s been in a car accident,” the new assistant district attorney says.

It always looks like that, Michelle thinks.

Michelle looks at the woman’s hands. Defensive wounds. Nicotine stains. Wedding ring. Her hands look like her own hands. They look like everybody’s hands. Over the glossy photo paper, she pets them a little, as if fingers on photo paper can be soothed.

When she gets home, later that night, she airs out the car as well as she can but her kids know she smokes. All kids can tell.

Sarah

Even the bad dads die. Sarah hadn’t seen him in years. Her mother divorced him when he was in prison. His daughters, even the ones he didn’t touch, didn’t see him after he got out. He would call. But a busy signal is a thing of the past. Call waiting. You don’t even have to pick up the phone. Nonstop ringing. Everybody’s home.

Her father’s girlfriend, or maybe just the girl he was living with, stabbed him. She wanted his money or his drugs or his kindness. You can’t get anything just by asking for it these days. Although stabbing
and jabbing and tickling with your fingers don’t get you very far. The girlfriend lost the money. The father lost his daughters. The daughters called the mother when the coroner called them. The mother, like my mother, divorced but really never, arranged the funeral and paid off the father’s outstanding bills because no one should decompose in debt.

Sarah wrote a book of poems and in doing so, forgave his other debt. She claims her father in fire, in plant, in skin, in tree, in warming, and in globe. It’s easy to love a father now that he is gone and you don’t expect anything— no check, no letter, no poem— in the mail.

Rebecca

Rebecca is canning six-hundred-and-seventy-two pounds of peaches for an art show. Five friends will arrive on July 29th to help her boil Mason jars, sanitize lids, slice peaches, dissolve sugar. I am not one of those friends and I feel guilty from five-hundred miles away. If you are too busy micromanagining your own life to help your friend put up six-hundred-and-seventy-two pounds of peaches in the name of art, what kind of friend are you?

Rebecca posted pictures of the crates of peaches. Ten cardboard crates of peaches sit on tarps to protect the floors from smashed peaches. Andi, her daughter, her third child, the one who survived, pats the top of the crates like she is destined to eat every one. You can be a mama and an artist, as long as you have faith. Which is the point. Raised Mormon,
Rebecca’s art comes from the crucible of be-a-good-girl and you-can-do-whatever-you-set-your-mind to. Set your mind against this hard thought. It will leak like a peach. Mormons are a stubborn lot—they believe they will persist beyond the rest of us in the rapture. One of the comments on the photos on Facebook read, “Your Mormon is showing.” Enough peaches to get her to her next show. Enough peaches to feed the daughter who almost did not survive far into the future. Enough peaches to persist through the rapture. Rebecca has covered all her bases and I want to call her so but no one wants to hold a phone with sticky fingers so I watch for updates on Facebook and feel so bad I’m not there. If you cannot help your friend preserve six-hundred-and-seventy-two pounds of peaches in the name of the End Times what kind of friend are you? You forward her pictures of the one peach ripening on your kitchen counter. Scarcity and abundance. Between the two of you, you’ll figure out some kind of balance.

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