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The Chiaroscuro Effect of Relentless Parenting Under Lockdown

I erect an easel and arrange the canvas. My aim is to reflect this immediate version of myself, but light is ephemeral, and I can't make sense of the subject.

The abscess over my left breast ruptures. I dab this new opening in my body, catching dripping liquid the color and texture of custard. I have to be on camera for a meeting in a few minutes. There is no space, no margin to sit with pain, horror, or fear. I cup my breast for a moment and move through the rest of the day performing productivity, altered, exhausted by the ways pregnancy has abstracted this body and continues to do so long after these daughters have been birthed.

The youngest of the two was born into no village. Her digital fingerprints, coded to her date of birth, will be markers of a time when people retreated to their nests and birdsong could be heard where traffic had once rioted. I feel shockwaves of labor at five o'clock in the morning on Father's Day. I don't want to bother my husband. I'm sure it's nothing. Go back to bed. I steady myself on the radiator absorbing thunderclaps within. My oldest daughter holds on to my nightgown, sleepy and muted but knowing.

Bones shift without breaking to make way for life. The sheets are blood bathed and the baby does not cry. The midwife rubs my baby vigorously with a towel. But the baby has not cried. My body roots itself in oath. You don't get to breathe until that baby does, and not a second before.

Baby girl finally cries and she is handed over to me. The expectation is that I shift my bum forward so the nurse can sew the rift while I breastfeed. The expectation is that I walk to the bathroom to piss and show the nurse I possess sufficient bodily functions. The expectation is that I walk to the parking lot because there is no porter available to wheel me out. At this I say no. I cannot. The nurse wheels me out instead, marvels at my newborn's thick black hair and compares it to mine. She maneuvers into audacity, digging her fingers into my hair, fondling my crown. Is this all your hair? The expectation is that I don't interrogate this moment. You helped me birth a human. How could you dehumanize me so quickly now?

We drive home winding down soundless streets of London. Baby gifts arrive in the post. Adoration is projected virtually. Our front door is closed firmly, though the door to the rear garden, seldom open before, becomes our gateway to the outside world. The four of us listen to music, move plant pots around, and finger paint.

Three months later, and my spirit darkens. The expectation is that we return to work. The expectation is that I sustain my body in order to sustain other bodies. That my sutures have melted away, my body is whole again, and I can be penetrated. Split in two again. The expectation is that I keep moving in silence. We are at the precipice of fall and I fear winter. Inside, I feel myself made up of squiggly lines. I've been here before. I know what's coming.

It's rage.

In sickness and in health

At this point in the sketch, the main composition is still unclear. Though my body is physically larger now, it contracts on the canvas squeezed in by tenebrism emerging all around me.

Rage on canvas is a Caravaggio. The beheadings, the crucifixion, the crimson, and above all the strike between light and darkness that inverts Manichean ideals.

I first heard of the 17th century artist from a writer friend whose own dark tendencies simmered in a constant state then boiled over onto her short stories. I found kinship in her shadows. Her rage was cultivated in Vermont and heeled in Birkenstocks. We were in an MFA program together and I listened to her wax poetic over Philip Roth, Jack Kerouac, Joyce Carol Oats, and Flannery O'Connor. Her literary acquaintance was reflected in the syllabus – reified as white and right. We bonded over motherlessness. It's not that we didn't have mothers. It's that we were preemptively wading through sorrow of never becoming mothers. It didn't seem like it was in the cards for women like us. Our lives were sharp metal edges and dimly lit at the time. It was as if we had been locked in Caravaggio's cellar¹, arranged in obscene poses, sometimes aggrieved, sometimes trampled.

Ten years later, calculating suicide over circumstantial infertility and persistent unemployment, I became a pregnant. The expectation was that the psychological shift toward maternity be instant. The expectation was that I leap out of resolute depression and desire to live again for everyone but myself. Moving into lightness, joyful and gratified.

And I did.

Then I found out I was pregnant again. My loaves multiplied, I was ready to do it all once more. Giving birth again with no maternal tribe to catch the baby. Scooping up the tomato-sized blood clot that falls out of me in the shower weeks after labor. Disguising bald patches of postpartum hair loss. Coming to accept a new body, someone else's body, whose frame no longer aligns with my wardrobe. A good body that has served me well. A good body that has served us all so well.

I rubbed my belly triumphant for just one month when the substance of quotidian life began to dissipate. There had been dubious rumblings of a sickness. That it had been transmitted at a wet market. Soon it enveloped a city. It's material reality sent tentacles

¹ Sohm, Philip. "Caravaggio's Deaths." *The Art Bulletin* (New York, N.Y.) 84.3 (2002): 449-68.

across the globe. Then it came here strident on a Post-It note on my front door. The upstairs neighbors had Covid-19.

We retreated north. My husband's family shifted their clutter to accommodate us. I set up my screens and worked three jobs, seven days a week, while my husband was furloughed. I went for a walk two times in four months. The convergence of perpetual safekeeping, and a pregnancy so disagreeable that I crawled on hands and knees up the stairs, tied me to the bed, the sofa, and the occasional chair.

I calcify. To mother my oldest, nurture the unborn, and survive with this moment alongside my husband meant there was no space, no margin to sit with pain, horror, or fear.

Home as the locus

What is the light source and where does it fall? If it falls to my face the subject will be imperfect. If it falls to my body the fractures will glint. If it falls to the hem of my dress paucity will show.

On April 8th, the swift hand of Spain's culture ministry stopped the auction of a baroque painting attributed to "the circle" of 17th-century Spanish painter José de Ribera. Listed at \$1,800, expert art dealers clamored to see the painting up close. The debate ignited. Is this painting, with all the trappings of crimson and chiaroscuro, really an obscure work by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio?

I may not possess a discerning eye, but I look at this discovery and I feel nothing. There is a gesture in the general direction of Caravaggesque. That I can tell. It is the visceral reaction to the work that is missing. Perhaps the condition of the piece and its discoloration suppresses vitality.

The magnetism of Caravaggio's work resides in its explicitness, its urgency, its lust. Once you see the work, you are complicit. It is 17th-century rap music delivered by one

of the most notorious artists of the time. Arrogant, lawless, bawdy, hair-trigger temper, and so often embodied in court documents and biographies as dark in character, hair, eyes, and style of dress.

I encounter the dark artist time and again, each time reminded of shared immorality. His Bacchus is my own. As I wade through the muck of this pandemic I revel in memories of impetuosity and incarnation of a greater spectrum of emotions than that which is afforded to me here in England.

Before this, my life was kaleidoscopic, even carnivalesque. There was a pluralism that presented ecstasy, indulgence, melancholy, and rage. My upbringing in pre-gentrified Jersey City echoed Caravaggio's Rome. Violent entanglements, social absurdity. We were all complicit in the lunacy. Each time the dark artist plucked an outcast from the streets and captured their humanity in all its ugliness and veracity, he painted the tribe I was born into. Drug addled, uneducated, lascivious, destitute, unwilling to assimilate in tongue or convention. Reveling under a Catholic capitulation. That my name is Maria and my neck is tattooed with an image of the crucifixion should be sufficient evidence.

But in England we can have none of that. The expectation is that I perform chaste citizenry as I make my way beneath the unvarying eye of CCTV. That I strip myself of religious syncretism. That joy is reframed in moderation and restraint. That anger too is restrained. The expectation is to be re-colonized.

And I was.

Then George Floyd was murked by a cop. That is to say murdered outright. His existence nearly erased had it not been for the cameras. I lit candles of religious syncretism to George Floyd. I mourned for my home country, exhausted by our persistent ugliness that emerges as a waterlogged monster that won't die. I watched George Floyd and Brianna Taylor spark reactions to oppression across the globe, a diasporic black uprising, and it was bittersweet.

What I could not resolve was the matter of my immediate reality. There was no one in my bubble of safety I could sit across and speak to about the psychological load of oppression. The convention was to recognize the event and move on. The convention was an English stereotype I wanted to push back against. I wanted to work through burgeoning disorientation and chaos within me. To address the squiggly lines and work through it but there was no space, no margin to sit with pain, horror, or fear.

The emergence of home as the locus of professional, private, feminine, political, racial, and creative experiences now demanded that I ask repeatedly *How do I maintain a sense of presence? How do I exorcise these vexations? How do I bind myself tight enough to endure English life in the north? How do I parent lovingly when agitation habitually yanks me by the collar? How do I keep Caravaggio's shadows of psychological and physical mourning at bay?*

To reconcile a shard

If Caravaggio painted me now, my white blouse would be askew with my oldest daughter sitting on my lap pushing a finger into the abscess on my breast, the modern Incredulity of Saint Thomas.

When my mother was ill, as she frequently was, my grandmother, a chorus of aunts, and family friends whom we also called aunts, would take turns cooking and cleaning and looking after my sister and I. My father would take me to his home on the weekends per the custody agreement. My paternal grandmother would take me to the Dominican Republic in the summer. The expectation was that even as a single mother, parenting was not a solo act. That I replicate the chorus. That my daughters, my beloved, and I would be submerged in extended family love too. The expectation was never this solitary, relentless parenting under lockdown.

The convergence of pregnancy, a global pandemic, and the circus of American politics clang about in my head. The oppressive nuclear family structure then works in tandem to constrict my freedom to express diametrical responses both emotional and physical

to these same catalysts. The panic attacks set in. Anxiety buttressed by sleeplessness drowns me. I cry in hidden spaces but my daughters seek me out. I wipe away the distress and parent absence behind the eyes.

So I write.

I reconcile these shards through multi-modal writing. At times indeterminate and at times academic. Always toward inclusivity and as a form of activism. I write as an anxiety suppressant and an outlet for passions restrained.

This year I didn't write in my journal. Writing in my leather-bound journal across thick, honey-colored pages would have crystalized the hallucination that has been this past year. I wrote in other directions instead. This computer is nearly a decade old. My fingers slide across black oily keys with intimacy. Here is where the cerebral, the emotional, the anxiety, worry, pressure, joy, and love, so much love, come to dance.

My partner gifts me time. He bundles up the girls and takes them to the park. They return and he entertains, cooks, and cuddles them until they sleep. I sit in a meditative state writing away rage. Writing my way to latitude.

The byline is amorphous. I once asked my husband to read an article after we had been married and he said nothing of the work except to ask why I had written under my maiden name. Because I was a writer before I met you and this piece I keep for myself. Then I wrote in ways that captured this new embodiment with new allegiances and the old byline wouldn't do. That version of myself changed too. Now I hyphenate my last name, genuflecting to the ancestors, past selves, my daughters, my beloved.

Re-seeing

I emerge from the writer's room road weary and slide into bed. I sleep hard and wake tabula rasa ready to re-see.

Amelia Arenas² argues that Caravaggio is canonical not because he is the best of the Baroque but because he gave the world a new way of regarding realism.^[2] A realism that is involved and emotive. *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew* renders the viewer complicit in the immediacy writing. The urgency of divine revelation, fleeting captivation, and the self-doubt that accompanies it all is right there on the canvas.

When I am entrenched in the prosaic or when I am wading through exasperation, the need to shift my perception of realism becomes imperative. I want to transmute through writing. Sometimes the writing doesn't come. Sometimes the sublime eludes me. I give in to everyday acts instead.

Weekend mornings I sip coffee as the girls play raucous and high pitched. British morning news clips demystify the vaccine, commemorate national hero Captain Tom Moore, and extol the virtues of small wonders created in average homes like ours. UK news stories are saccharine compared to the experience of watching news from the U.S. Today's headline features bodycam footage of police shooting Duante Wright. A school shooting in Tennessee. George Floyd's brother takes the stand at Derek Chauvin's trial.

I feel myself the ungrateful immigrant now. My host country draws up reports with no findings of institutional racism and we respond with a collective eye roll. But my family is safe here. I re-see our small lives with a greater possibility of longevity and peace. So, I constrict myself further to fit in.

Hyphenate futures

The intention had been to draft a self-portrait, but the page was crowded with Afro-Caribbean cherubs and seraph chanting my name.

² Amelia Arenas. "Sex, Violence and Faith: The Art of Caravaggio." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 23.3 (2016): 35-52. Web.

The margins are still darkened. But what is a chiaroscuro without light? Luminescence above me broadens to encompass the small tribe, not that I was born into, but that I co-created. The four of us, my beloved and our girls, acurrucados in the bed, tickling, pretending, burgeoning new realities. A crown of thorns adorned with flowers.