**Animate Work**

1. **An Apology to the Listeners**

This is a very personal talk. It combines recent poems, prose notes which are dated and addressed to a ‘you’, and the courtly rhetoric of criticism. It may at times be difficult to distinguish between these modes, but that’s ok.

**TRIPLE TIME**

True life waving in silver marks
the intersection of all our possibilities:
before you know it you are
on them, a creator, mittened and brave.

The work of grazing, building an aspect
made of all our resemblances
multiplies the hope that you are
and always will be, vehicle in the world
to the good life contracted. It is no saint
already, its wet bed no bundled hayrack
we may not regret the piercing
we age with. But the light shining

from the epochal hole in the gate,
from the dark where
the echogenic pulse empties into bone
is an echo of all possible lights: the same
that emanated from you across
the impossibilities of ever knowing how,
to be called to happiness, to that resemblance.
Life worth crowning, bird worth feeding.

I've just returned from eight months of maternity leave. Rather than treating this spectacular hiatus as something to be sutured over, and coming to you with a big professional analysis of some obscure late modernist verse, I wanted to talk about this period, and what it has done to my writing. What is the relationship between being a patron and practitioner of the domestic arts, and poetry?

This talk considers writing within the home. Home: a space not merely permeable to politics but, as the *oikos*, the antique origin and locus of politics; a time bisected by biological needs rather than the rhythms of intellectual acquisition, wage labour and historical chronology; and a theatre for performing subjects without an audience, whose dialogue is the foundation for all forms of participation in social life.

One of these subjects moves and speaks, discovering the ontic in her everyday existence and play, swinging an octopus, in cotton on a mat painted with fish flaps and blinking shells. At least one of these subjects observes and records, care displacing but not erasing aesthetics and ontology, mirrored in the one whose coming-to-consciousness she seeks to understand without projecting onto it the full bloom of her narcissism. Or they are both observing, and recording, but only one life depends on it. What each does and says and how she came to be there is a challenge to the premises of the autonomous subject on which the epistemological, legal and political theories of Western selfhood are based. But the observations are humble: what shape must the mouth make, how do the fingers operate. The record should be magnificent and humble, too, deferent and triumphant.

But wait. This is all wrong. I meant to say that *I love you*, and that nothing else has ever happened. I meant to say: nothing –

### 4. Disquisitions on the Universal and the Particular

I began looking for persuasive writing on mothering and on infancy. Two books which I'd recommend are *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood*, ed. Patricia Dienstfrey and Brenda Hillman (Wesleyan, 2003), a collection of essays, and *Not for Mothers Only: Contemporary Poems on Child-Getting and Child-Rearing*, ed. Catherine Wagner and Rebecca Wolff (Fence, 2007).
In addition to these books, the reading which has been of most use to me was not poetry, or feminism, or psychoanalysis or philosophy, but textbooks on child development, popular linguistics, studies of how the perceptive faculties clarify and elaborate themselves. There’s plenty of magic in the basic biological facts these books contain; and in their finding that care lowers cortisol and builds the brain, there’s plenty of hope.

Meanwhile, I read poems on infancy and mothering, and was regularly disappointed or confused. Many of the poems veered between transfiguration – squalling infant becomes angel of wisdom – and melancholia, the lament of the mother damned to domesticity.

I have a great deal of sympathy for these positions. I don’t intend to sound superior.

10 November 2008

Now I’m running half dressed into your room four times a night to gather you up before you’re beset by complete agony. If I hadn’t tucked the blankets in your head might be pressed unergonomically against the calico bumper. If I hadn’t arrived in time the vibrations might convulse your whole torso, wrapped tightly in its layers of cloth and carefulness. The breast makes it so alright that you shudder and pant while I’m preparing it. The need is terrifying, a clear addiction untempered by any modesty or manners.

It helps to fall asleep
in the same condition you will rouse to.
It helps to fall asleep
braced against the tumid and massive presence
of the feeder, the custodian of your needs.
She marks time she and the day
is long the same things keep happening
is it out yet yes
like a light, glowing hot. We put you down
in a cage, that comes with these instructions:
fearful loneliness is the condition
of your liberation, and will yield to pleasure
if not to horror and a dry mouth.

All this means what it says in books and on the tv: the decline of any other kind of intimacy. The disappearance of intellectual ambition. The invisibility of domestic labour. All time is stolen from you, sneaking up the back stairs and hoping the giant won’t realise we’ve absconded with the loot: a newspaper, the telephone, the language.
12 March 2009

The morning nap, the second cup of tea. Species stroll in the garden. Gratefulness.

Not reading so much these days as devouring. Leap from page to page, scavenging for the point. Stuff it in my gob, then, usually, forget it.

The quick quick quick of your rest times: get the washing in, the cutlery to its coffins, tidy and oblige. Rushing home to see you, on my bicycle, smiling in love: getting through the tasks. Using up the day. Then the slow, the slow of feeding you. I linger until I can feel from the slight shift of the weight of your head that you are ready to be put down. Then listen with fear through the monitor for the end of my furlough: might I not have time to say and do, quick quick quick.

Learn in all to economize. And lavishly to spend.

Nonetheless, I’m not in sympathy with Adrienne Rich who, when asked ‘Don’t you ever write poems about your children’, responded that ‘the male poets of my generation did write poems about their children—especially their daughters. For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one’s mother, where I existed as myself’ (Of Woman Born p. 21). For Rich, being someone’s mother and being ‘myself’ seem to be mutually exclusive. I know that I can’t write as a mother if being a ‘mother’ just means being an unpaid domestic labourer. But – and here I am aware how third-generationish I sound – why cling to the existence of ‘myself’ in its bright preemptive finery, before and above the selves we are together? This intimate relation has a peculiar and fierce intelligence. The lesson of gestation, the lesson of infancy is that humanity belongs to mutuality. That to me is a transformative idea.

IN LEAGUE

The most glorious athlete stands out
in the field of water. Doting on the unity
of body and the flattened world:
world without aperture, smooth the surface
of effort and degree. This category
is a category of attainment; sun shines in her eyes
reflect roof tiles, and a nation.
Well cold is the water as analogue, to dive in
is to be alone in ripe skin, surrounded
by brambles speak nothing to the flattened sky.
Put her awake in her cot, let her learn
to sleep on schedule and as antidote
to the loneliness of dimpled linens. But the struggle
in the arena for individual glory like
the advice that rains on the ‘new barren mothers’
knows nothing of the nine months,
bodies fished out of each other in strain elation,
or pure delight in two symmetrical heads rubbing
autonomy and the law’s basis in autonomy.
First I want you to learn to trust us, to be
fearless in the sudden dark: for you will be hoisted
in the arc of a cry, swung this is our promise of mutuality
no losing no contest to claim the fold the flattened
premise of the world as your very own.

Rich and Sylvia Plath have made deep impressions on the possibilities of writing as and
about mothers. Of course, they were writing and mothering under unreformed and
variously difficult conditions. But in my view, they also intoxicated the notion of a
motherhood as a subject or form for writing. Writing after them, poets often describe
motherhood as a constraint or a burden with occasional joys, as a distraction from the
real self-actualizing work. Engaging with this tradition, I am tempted to find some
ennobling discourses to legitimize the meditative practice of mothering. Privacy, a
feminist despair at being caught in the kitchen or the nursery, and my antipathy to
confessional poetry: all these things make me want to dress myself in elaborate
metaphors, congested and sophisticated analogies, which show that yes, this could be
important work.

In Kathleen Fraser’s infinitives: ‘To admire and want. To want to say, but feel chagrin
for obvious saying, but to be urgent, defying, pinning together and sewing, to be ripping
apart and wiping, to be cooking soup and typing, ...but to choose a desk and a chair and
to feel the singleness of it, the actual child of it coming home’ (GP 147). I feel that
urgency and chagrin, pinning together and ripping apart the two leaves of the same life.
Artistry and parenting: both are socially sanctioned, as somehow central to human
progress, but both are restrained or even undermined by necessity: the requirement to
be visibly working, doing something constructive outside the home. And yet both are, of
course, constructive.

How can the writing I’m doing now, this prosaic set of interiors, be as important as the
verse essays I’ve written in the past? That work was steady, contemplative, researched;
this work is snipped from time, compressed into the 25 minutes of the morning nap,
after the dishes are loaded, before the emails. That work was carefully revised; this
can’t make itself available to revision. That work was the expression of political and
aesthetic commitment, in its form and vocabulary as well as its allusions; this work is
sentimental, so sentimental!, formally lazy, a grab-bag of phrases that swim up as I rock and rock and walk. Where previously I would account for personal impressions by obscuring them, overdressing them, to synthesize the particular and the public in a code which never permits total comprehension, now I’m – just telling a story? The old poems were always ducking and diving, saying and withholding. This work is not static, but so slow it is nearly still, unfolding in real time.