

ANGELA MORALES

Mammalian

When I was sixteen-years old and a sophomore in high school, my cousin Kristy, age eighteen, selected me to be her birthing “coach.” She’d tested positive on the home pregnancy test, gotten dumped by her twenty-three-year old boyfriend, and against the advice of almost everyone, had decided to raise the baby on her own. As her birthing coach, I would fail miserably, since I possessed neither a commanding presence nor faith in the Lamaze philosophy—exercises, which, frankly, I thought were embarrassing and stupid. I could barely force myself to lead Kristy through the “Hee-Hee-Ha-Ha” breathing exercises which the Lamaze teacher insisted would help my partner to manage her pain, nor could I flutter my fingertips across her back or arms, a technique which our bandanna-wearing, ruddy cheeked teacher called “effleurage” and then assured us (“us” being husbands and boyfriends) that the distraction of a light touch could be, not only *romantic*, but would help our partners (our partners being wives and girlfriends) to remain calm and focused. Not a “touchy” person by nature, my hands must have felt unsettling and possibly irritating to Kristy, as it pained me to trace little circles on her arm or to massage her lower back. Though we’d practically grown up together, and I knew her better than just about

anybody, I could be aloof and unexpressive, even with the people whom I loved the most.

In Grandma Ruth's stacks of *National Geographic*, I'd run across photographs of indigenous women giving birth—maybe Yanomami in the rainforest or Mayan women, always the laboring woman grimacing and biting down on a rag as she squatted naked or barely clothed and leaned against a tree or another woman. Another woman always attended—sometimes a whole team of women—mothers, sisters, aunts, and even elders who sat vigil nearby, chanting and praying and burning incense, all of them participating in some kind of mass hallucination that would help ease the baby from eternal darkness and into the light of day.

Then, there we were—eighteen and sixteen-years-old—alone in a windowless, sterile hospital room, armed only with a Styrofoam cup filled with ice chips, not a tree or river or star in sight. Cut off from the natural world and any community of women, we stared at each other in a panic. Where was our oak tree? Would the sound of a river have eased her pain? Where were the elders? Like an animal caught in a trap, Kristy began to lose her mind, and all I could do was gawk at her, stunned by nature's merciless grip. That day I vowed never to get knocked-up, never to allow my body to become overtaken by whatever mysterious pleasures might result in a million tadpoles swimming upstream into *my* uterus.

Sitting on the floor next to her hospital bed and wearing my paper booties, I leaned against the wall, closed my eyes, and resigned myself to failure. I could not guide my poor cousin in any way. I decided that all I could do was sit beside her—another body in the room. Finally, after seventeen or eighteen hours of watching my cousin writhe in agony, the nurses appeared, all business, methodically positioning a surgical lamp over the bed, raising the metal stirrups, and ordering this teenage Jane Doe, this random eighteen-year-old unmarried girl to breathe. *Breathe!*

After a while of this—of nurses scolding Kristy and demanding that she push harder, and Kristy shrieking to them that they could all go to hell—there, suddenly, appeared a baby—wriggling and red, followed by a great splash of blood and amniotic fluid that filled the

room with the overpowering smell of iron. I couldn't take my eyes off the big, squirming creature that, indeed, appeared to have catapulted from some unknown darkness and into the light of the world. That one young female body could produce an offspring so large and vociferous, and with such violence! And that through an opening so small could appear another human being! I swooned (literally) at the thought of it. Dizzy and nauseous, I backed up against the wall and sank to the floor as the glistening placenta slid onto a metal tray and the baby exercised her new lungs. I sat there like that, numbed, until the nurses told me that I needed to pick myself up and get out of the way.

Fat women are often made to feel ugly, lesser than, sloppy, undisciplined, and unsexy, but young children generally do not judge the worth of a woman or the affection they feel for her based on her body size, especially if those children already love large women, i.e. their mothers or aunts or grandmothers, women who have nurtured them, comforted them, fed them, told them stories. To children, a woman's body size is never part of the equation that totals her overall goodness or worth and it rarely occurs to those children that anyone would find such generous bodies unattractive and repellent. It never occurs to those children that those very same women might look in the mirror with self-loathing and a longing to be less than, to be smaller, to reduce themselves. Children enjoy a large woman's body—soft, strong arms that gently crush them against wide-soft bellies, a safe place where they can feel the warmth and generosity of a human body.

My mother, an average-sized woman with a body that produced five healthy babies, rarely hid her naked body from her children, each morning, dressing with her bedroom door wide open. I recall standing before her, talking to her about whatever random topic, as she perfumed, oiled, shaved, or powdered her body, and examined herself in the mirror, bending this way and that way, peering at her neck, maybe plucking her eyebrows, filing her nails. My mother's breasts were not small and perky like the women in *Charlie's Angels*; my mother's breasts were large and heavy and laced with blue veins. Her

belly and thighs were pale and soft as dough, and because I'd seen her body my whole life, it never occurred to me that her body should be different somehow—thinner, more muscular, hidden away. My mother's naked body looked to me the way a body *should* look. Sometimes to entertain us, she'd perform a kind of Polynesian dance in her underwear that would get her fat jiggling all at once, the loose flesh and her thighs and belly all wobbly and out of control, like her fat had gone crazy. Watching her, we nearly busted a gut, as she liked to say. Women's bodies can be hilarious. Nobody talks much about that.

Three days after giving birth to my son, I thought that I was dying. My arms felt tingly, my chest throbbed and burned, and I felt panicky. Of course, my symptoms were part of the normal lactation process. Women, for the first few days post-partum, produce only small amounts of a thick substance called colostrum, easily digestible for the newborn and rich in immunoglobulin A and leukocytes, all good for fighting infection. In the first few days, new mothers who nurse their babies often fret over whether the baby is getting any nutrients at all. But, normally, if all goes well, in the span of a few hours, the “mature” milk floods in, and the baby will have hit the jackpot. When the floodgates opened in my body, in the span of an hour or two, my breasts ballooned to ridiculous proportions and became absurdly round. Engorged. Inflated. Nature had claimed me.

Part A: my breasts had become *milk storage vessels*. I had read about lactation, but reading does not equal experiencing.

Part B: the milk would need to get *out* once it had come in. Thus, feeding the baby became my promise to him, and I set myself on a mission to fulfill that promise. Once I figured out how to sit, how to position the baby with a pillow under his head, how to relax, how to sip a cold drink, how to close my eyes, take a deep breath, and pray for “release”—a mild cramping would occur and then a steady, miraculous flow. Human milk. An elixir, a panacea, the baby slept soundly, and day-by-day, grew plumper, more alert, and happier.

Thus, I allowed nature to claim me. I surrendered. Sitting in this chair or that chair, gazing out this window or that window, looking at

this tree or that tree, I thought about all sorts of things and nothing at all. I watched a blue jay hopping around on the potato vine. I studied a spider rappelling down her strand of silk; I told myself that if I did nothing else within the span of a day except *feed the baby*, I would have done my job like any resilient mammal minding her instincts. My consciousness simultaneously dimmed and expanded. Those hours and hours and hours of feeding the baby I let my thoughts roll on by: the shape of nipples, both plastic and real, pacifiers, the cream layer atop milk, wet nurses, silicone implants, starving babies, twin orbs, rivers flowing, rivers blocked, serrated teeth, the sun and the moon.

My body and my mind split up briefly when I was nine years old and had fallen off my bike and hit my head on the curb. I wasn't wearing a helmet, and I don't recall the accident, but I do recall the distinct sensation of emerging from a fog while sitting in the emergency room. It was as though my mind had been put inside another body and suddenly my consciousness had flickered back on as if someone had plugged me in. I saw my feet hanging limply from the chair. My hands appeared big and useless. My face felt throbbly and swollen. Strangers talked at me, a crowd of faces, all of them peering down at me and pursuing nonsensical questions, and I didn't know the answers. I did not know what they expected of me. Name? Age? I had no clue. President of the United States? I did not know if a president was a type of bird or a cat or a food that you ate for dinner. My brain recognized some words but not others. The word "president" sounded as foreign to me as Swahili. United States: A blur of syllables. My brain slipped deeper into its cave like a mollusk recoiling into its shell while my body remained in the room. Somewhere between brain and body, the "I" remained, abandoned by both.

Did amnesia allow one girl to walk away and another girl to step in? How does one know when one regains consciousness, whether *you* are the same you who lost consciousness? Who was that girl staring at the doctors with her vacant expression? That girl, like a lighthouse keeper, tended my body as the other girl slipped away.

Neurologists say that a head injury leaves all kinds of mysteries, and the complete effects to any one brain may never be known. What exactly happened to my brain upon impact with the curb on Country Club Drive that day in 1976 might be unknown forever, secrets lost in stardust. As my cauliflower-brain banged around in its skull case, shaken up in its bath of cerebral-spinal fluid, did the injury scare away my then-self and make way for a new self? Did it deaden certain control towers and awaken others, like the language area, the cerebral cortex? Certainly, the injury left me confused, but perhaps with letters and words all scrambled up but closer to the surface for easier access in some future life.

When we say “the body,” it sounds like we might be referring to a murder scene. “The body was found partially clothed and floating in the river,” said the detective. It’s like when a person dies, they cease to be a person and are reduced to the flesh, to the body form. If the person is still alive, we look for the person. If the person is thought to be dead, we look for the body.

“She has a nice body,” someone might say, as if that body is not something exactly representing her –not her, but something she has. One might say, “She has a nice dog,” in a similar fashion. A body can be dead or alive, but it does not necessarily equal the sum of the person.

The Mayans tossed the bodies of sacrificial children into massive cenotes in the rainforest of the Yucatan. You might shout into a cenote and not hear an echo; your voice would disappear down into the earth, into a hole so deep that birds can fly around inside it. What became of those tiny bodies as they smashed against the water so far below, scarcely making a sound? Their bodies decomposed in silence over the centuries, bones dissolving, bodies absorbing into the deepest of rivers, cell by cell.

We might find it necessary to destroy a body before it begins. If the developing body is connected to our bodies, we sometimes feel that the new body will require more life than we are able to give. We

imagine its pinky-nail sized existence, a transparent clump of cells buried deep inside our own spongy centers, a pulsating quasar of possibilities, a faint set of signals sent from another galaxy—the galaxy of us, and the signals keep getting stronger. We want to trust that our bodies will know the instincts of animals and that we can numb our chattering minds—that loathsome lump of cream cheese that sits in our skulls, that worries for our bodies, questions our choices, berates us, solves riddles, shows us, in dreams and flashes, our failures.

If only, if only, if only we could silence our brains, the thing that is “us” and let the body swell, let this new body grow, not think or question, but simply Be. When a new body begins, when we cannot sustain it, it’s as though we are caught in a net.

Diagnosed with chronic Lyme Disease, I had just begun a monthlong round of I.V. antibiotics when a new body began inside my body. I did not have the strength to imagine my own future much less the literal strength to carry this new body inside my sick body. My joints had deteriorated. My heart fluttered. I could barely carry a bag of groceries. I could barely make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for my living child. “A child is a blessing,” Dr. Reddy said. I wanted to ignore my brain. I wanted to close my eyes and allow my body to bloom like a flower. I tried. I failed. Ultimately, I chose my body over the new body. At the clinic I was warned that my decision might haunt me forever and that I would carry with me a profound, unshakable guilt and sadness. Confession: I felt [mostly] relief. I suppose one could say that I was “pro-life.” My life.

In the hospital emergency exam room, the intake nurse asks Patrick, my husband, to leave the room. “I’d like to speak to your wife alone,” she says, giving him a sidelong glance as he slips out the door. To me, she says, “Has your husband hit you or hurt you or threatened you?” I am clutching my abdomen, rocking away my pain, with what will turn out to be an infected gallbladder; I am caught off guard.

“Has he *what*?” I say, awakening from my pain-trance.

“Has you husband hurt or threatened you tonight?” she repeats, with sharp flashing eyes and a no-nonsense expression.

“No,” I say. “Never.” I expect her to soften her tone, that she’ll laugh and say, “Yeah, Sorry. We’re required to ask.” But she does not soften. She continues to search my face giving me time to change my answer. I wonder if this line of questioning is standard or whether she had suspected abuse because of Patrick’s dour expression, his crossed arms, because every single minute of every single day, men slam their fists into their wives’ bodies, their girlfriends, their daughters (and yes, women do it, too. And, yes, there are abused men, but most cases involve men believing that a woman’s body belongs to them).

You are my wife; therefore, I can.

My husband’s fists have never slammed into my body; my husband’s hands are healing and gentle. (I learned early-on how to evaluate a man’s hands—my father taught me when to duck and to memorize the contours of knuckles as they collided with my mother’s arm or leg or cheek).

But as the nurse searches my eyes, the reminder of this everyday truth intensifies my pain. I clutch my abdomen and begin to cry. The pain is unbearable, and I suspect the nurse does not believe me. How could I explain to her, and how could I explain to myself, that her questions have transformed my mundane gallbladder pain into a lightning-strike of all the pain of all the women in all the world who have ever felt a fist slam into their bellies, the fist of someone who supposedly loves them.

One day when the baby was about a year old, I was busy making dinner, rushing around the kitchen in a cloud of steam—chopping vegetables, sautéing, boiling, whatever. He had reached the age of escape-artist, expert-climber, adept at squeezing into cabinets, at demolishing the living room by throwing every object he could find into a massive heap in the middle of the room, like Roy’s mad sculpture of Devil’s Tower in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Sometimes I would give the baby the telephone to play with. I’d unplug it and let him push the buttons and puzzle over the coiled rubber cord. But this night, in a rush, I handed him the phone, forgetting to unplug it. He played with it for a few minutes, and I finished cooking and scooped him up for his bath. Just as I was

lowering my chubby boy into the bath water, someone's fists began pounding on the front door. No neighbor or kid selling candy bars had ever knocked like that. I scooped him back up, wrapped him in a towel, and peered around the hallway with a view to the glass-paneled front door. Under the porch light stood a police officer, a stocky black man with a gleaming, brass badge. He held a night stick in one hand and kept the other hand positioned over his gun.

Cautiously, I opened the door.

"You called 9-1-1," he said quietly, leaning in close.

Then it dawned on me. "Oh my God!" I said, immediately realizing what had happened. I clapped my hand across my mouth. "I'm so sorry," I said. "The baby...he was playing with the phone!"

I expected this police officer to give me a stern lecture about letting babies play with phones. A lecture about wasting taxpayers' money. About diverting police officers from legitimate calls. About how 9-1-1 wasn't a joke.

But he kept staring into the house, eyes scanning the living room, the dining room, as far as he could see.

"You sure you're ok?" he said, his eyes searching mine.

"I'm fine," I said, again, expecting his eyes to soften, for him to say, "Well, we just have to make sure." But his eyes did not soften, nor did he give me a lecture.

"Mind if I look around?" he said quietly.

"Sure," I said, backing away from the door to let him pass. Briefly, I was annoyed that he didn't believe me. For a minute I felt that he was overstepping his boundaries. Holding his holster with one hand, his night stick with the other, he strutted from end to end of the house, peering into the bedroom, into the closets, his heavy step firm and steadfast.

When he returned, he said, "I had to make sure someone wasn't hiding in the bedroom or that someone wasn't holding you hostage. Sorry about that."

"Hostage? Really? Well...thank you," I said. I mean, here was this man who had arrived to protect me when I did not even need protecting. Here was this man saving me from a hypothetical hostage-

taker, a husband who'd punched a wall, my theoretical abusive husband who'd promised to choke me or stab me if I'd said one word.

"I'm really sorry about this," I said again, jostling my big fat baby.

"It's okay, it's okay," he said, "It happens. Glad you're safe."

Leo and I watched him walk down the concrete path back to his police car. Again, I thought of the ways that men brutalize women, the ways that people brutalize children, the ways that police brutalize other men. But for that one moment, I felt thankful for this one man who would have protected me had I needed protecting.

ANGELA MORALES, a graduate of the University of Iowa's nonfiction writing program, is the author of *The Girls in My Town*, a collection of personal essays. Her work has appeared in *Best American Essays 2013*, *Harvard Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Southwest Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Arts and Letters*, *The Baltimore Review*, *The Pinch*, *Hobart*, *River Teeth*, *Under the Sun*, and *Puerto del Sol*, and *The Indianola Review*. She is the winner of the River Teeth Book Prize, 2014, and is a MacDowell Fellow. Her book is the 2017 winner of the PEN Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay. Currently she teaches composition and creative writing at Glendale Community College and is working on her second collection of essays.