

An aerial photograph of a vast, frozen body of water, likely a lake or a wide river. The foreground shows a textured, blue-tinged ice surface with some tracks or lines. In the middle ground, a series of snow-covered mounds or ridges run across the ice. The background features a dark, dense forest of trees along the shoreline under a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds.

# WHERE THE SANCTITY LIVES

*Heidi Reimer*

THE NIGHT before the first pregnancy test, my husband and I wake to scuffling. We go to the window and watch a raccoon scramble from a branch to a hole under the eaves of the garage, then haul three babies, one by one, up to join her. In the efficiency of her movements I read irritation. Something human lurks in the stretch of her arm.

Something animal lies in my knowledge that I'm pregnant.

I return to bed and stare at the ceiling. The mother raccoon is an omen.

In the morning, the test is negative.

I am not at ease. I feel in my body, in the breasts so sensitive they hurt from the friction against my shirt, in the memory of powerful risk-taking sex five days before ovulation, that the test is wrong. I walk to the library and borrow books on ambivalent motherhood. I sit on a café patio and read, and I write my terror of this potential upheaval.

The test four days later is positive.

IN THE theology of my youth, the sacred was heavenly, spiritual. Male.

The carnal nature, the earthy and physical, was to be denied and overcome.

That the female was particularly carnal—woman's kinship with Eve damning, the sexuality of her body dangerously overt, her absence from the Trinity obvious—was a tenet implicit.

I was pious. I was brainy. My body was irrelevant. I swathed it in voluminous dresses, the better to conceal its seductive femininity and dissuade fleshly desire. I knew it only as an inconvenient, even distasteful, vehicle for my mind and spirit.

I was not a woman who ran with wolves.

IN THE months before conception, I've been tuning in to my menstrual cycle. I'm thirty-two and coming off the pill, not because I want to conceive but because I want to know my body more deeply, to understand how I work as a cyclical being. I've recorded cervical fluid, temperature, connections between my inner life and my body's wax and wane. I've noticed that when I'm bleeding my awareness is diffuse, intellectually disconnected and spiritually attuned. Afterward I feel reborn. At ovulation I burgeon with emotional and creative fullness. Before menstruation I'm wild and unpredictable and intensely creative. It's wondrous: my body is my spirit is my mind is my heart.

I want to be grounded in my body. I do not, necessarily, want to be pregnant. Although we know which encounter resulted in conception, we didn't plan it. I'm stunned and unsurprised. I'm thrilled and devastated.

AT MENARCHE my mother bought me a ring. I picked it out at Sears, a swirling knot on a slim silver band. The ring was a symbol of my womanhood, my commitment to preserving my body's purity and its capacity for sex and baby-making as a gift for my future husband. I bled into bulky plastic-backed pads, I took ibuprofen for cramps, and I vowed to keep my body untainted.

This vow was no challenge. I was meant for intellectual and spiritual pursuits, for the written word, for a life of mind and spirit. The animal act of sex did not appeal.

DURING MY pregnancy we move from Toronto to a yellow cottage on a Northern Ontario lake. Otters cavort off our dock. A family of bears lives at the end of our gravel

drive. We walk the rutted track to the dam and stand on its metal span in the roar of water, glassy lake on one side, on the other surging river.

In a corner overlooking the lake we install my L-shaped desk. I'm writing a novel, hell-bent on completing the first draft before my due date and terrified of losing the touchstones of myself. Motherhood has occurred as debate in my head and heart, but now it becomes embedded, irrefutably, in my body. My belly swells to predominance. My breasts are phenomenal. A second heart beats inside me, a foot kicks under my ribcage. By the final trimester my thinking is diffuse. I try to concentrate on my novel and every word is difficult, alien, pointless. My creative energy is channeled into the creation inside me. All my resources are focused on making and nurturing this new human.

I'm awake through January nights, insomniac, full-bladdered, too large-bellied for comfort. From across the frozen lake, eerie and thrilling and unmistakably wild, wolves howl.

IN MY twenties my faith unraveled, a sweater snagged against a nail, unspooling bit by bit until it held together only loosely and then not at all. My best friend and I unraveled together, examining the strictures we'd lived within, discovering in their absence freedom and truth that weren't written in a book. We began to see ourselves as our own authorities. We began, tentatively, to look for the sacred in the earthy, the physical, the female.

At twenty-five we drove from Toronto to West Virginia to housesit for five months in a small mountain town. Crossing the state line we shrieked at the slogan emblazoned on a sign, scrambled from the car to photograph it. We raised our arms in exultation, our midriffs bared as we claimed the motto: *Wild and Wonderful*.

Mountains enfolded us. Rivers pooled and cascaded around us. A community of free spirits adopted us. We were drunk on the strength of its women, awed by their comfort in their bodies and choices, their unapologetic femaleness. We swam naked in

rivers, declaring, “We’re beautiful!” in wonderment. We sang in mountain music coffee houses. We danced in open fields under bright moons. Each lift of arms and sway of hips was a spiritual release.

I relinquished the last of my good-girl reticence and discovered the kiss.

I tried yoga: union of body, mind, spirit.

I read about self-pleasure. I got myself a mirror. Alone on my mattress on the floor, I made myself love my body in all the places it could be loved.

I had an epiphany: my sexuality does not belong to a hypothetical future husband or to the mass of men burning to conquer it.

My sexuality belongs to me.

THE ROOM glows the dim yellow of candles and shaded lamps. My clothing was shed hours ago. I’ve asked not to know the time, the stages of labor, my dilation. I move where instinct nudges: into the water, onto all fours, to a slow dance with my husband. I kneel on the bed with arms pressed into the sloped ceiling. I have never been so uninhibited, so distilled to my animal self. I moan. I grunt. I roar.

I roar until at last, at last, I push my daughter out of my body and into the world. I hold her against my stomach and the cord binding us stops pulsing and I look and see that she is a she and I bring her to my chest. She finds a nipple and sucks. No one weighs or diapers or dresses her for hours. We are flesh, skin on skin, mouth on breast. We are colostrum and oxytocin and euphoria and peace.

In the days after her birth I’m staggered by the secret I’ve discovered.

The female body—the messy, bloody, carnal female body—the powerful, life-giving, life-sustaining female body: this is where the sanctity lives.

There is nothing more sacred than this: My naked flesh. Her naked flesh. My breasts producing milk that she drinks from me, and through it, lives.

I never get around to reading the baby books I’m sure would be useful, possibly imperative, to read. Instead I find that I know what to do, that—much as I might argue

against the essentialism of women as mothers—mothering does, for me, come naturally. I follow my instinct, sleep with her snug against my body, wear her wrapped at my chest, feed her when she’s hungry. I’m bewildered by the plastic swings and strollers and monitors and isolating, barred cribs. I don’t want to put her down even to pee, though we’ve placed a baby seat in the bathroom for that purpose.

My body is the hub of life. It is all she needs.

IN WEST Virginia I met a man. The one who will watch a raccoon with me the night before a pregnancy test, the one who will hold me while I birth our baby. We spoke shyly, eyes averted, senses tuned to every movement. For nine months we wrote each other. He met me at La Guardia with a single yellow rose. That night in his apartment he said, “I’ll sleep on the couch,” and I said, “Come to the bed.”

It was carnal, it was spiritual, it was earthy, heavenly, male and female.

ONE MORNING when our baby is three months old, this man and I make love while she sleeps on the mattress beside us. We finish as she wakes, crying, and I roll over and offer my naked nipple. She sucks while he spoons me from behind. I feel brief embarrassment at the blurred line between sex and childcare, then a blaze of power. Coupling with my mate, feeding my offspring, I am fulfilling the highest and most basic of my functions as a mammal. My female body is fully engaged in the life-giving acts of which it is capable, and a circle is completed, the act that created her in tandem with the act that nourishes her.

And my body is the center of it all.

From across the lake—primal, instinctual, strong—the wolf pack calls.

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Wild & Wonderful