



BABY VERSES

The Narrative Poetry of Infants and Toddlers

Michael David Trout with Illustrations by Jean Rettun

BABY VERSES

The Narrative Poetry of Infants and Toddlers

Michael David Trout with Illustrations by Jean Rettun

To Vernon and Benona Hobbs, my grandparents,
who infused me with a sense of admiration and
respect for the dignity of each human's experience,
from my earliest moments.

Michael Trout

To my children, Elyse and Thomas, who have shown
me the miracles of childhood.

Jean Rettun



Copyright © 2008 The Infant-Parent Institute

Michael David Trout • The Infant-Parent Institute
328 North Neil Street • Champaign, Illinois 61820 USA
t: 217-352-4060 e: mtrout@infant-parent.com

Illustrator: Jean Rettun
Designer: Randee Bowlin, Precision Graphics, Inc.

ISBN 978-0-9761546-1-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or used
in any form or by any means without written permission from the publisher.

Printed in the U.S.A.

Table of Contents

Introduction

vii

PART one

PRENATAL LIFE

- | | | |
|---|--|----|
| 1 | inside
[awareness] | 2 |
| 2 | breaking peaces
[domestic violence] | 8 |
| 3 | earning my keep*
[rejection] | 16 |
| 4 | how many am i?
[vanishing twin] | 18 |

PART two

BIRTH AND PERINATAL LIFE

- | | | |
|---|---|----|
| 5 | twenty-five yards of gauze
[birth shame] | 24 |
| 6 | let me get this straight*
[circumcision] | 26 |
| 7 | gentle transitions
[newborn adoption] | 30 |
| 8 | i figured it out*
[being adopted] | 40 |

PART three

INFANCY AND TODDLERHOOD

- | | | |
|----|---|----|
| 9 | being a boy baby*
[gender difference] | 44 |
| 10 | being smart*
[domestic violence/alcoholism] | 46 |
| 11 | my daddy's eyes*
[social referencing/confidence] | 50 |
| 12 | family transitions
[divorce] | 52 |
| 13 | ghostbusters
[fear/fantasy] | 62 |
| 14 | i wiggled
[sexual abuse] | 68 |
| 15 | going away*
[dissociation] | 70 |
| 16 | multiple transitions
[foster care] | 74 |
| 17 | turning to the wall*
[maternal depression] | 86 |
| 18 | becoming two
[individuation] | 88 |

Subject Index 95

*on accompanying CD



Introduction

The voice of the infant.

Such a mystery—and a matter for conjecture—it has been, for hundreds of years. She didn't speak up too well, so we imagined she didn't have a voice at all. His brain was tiny, so we imagined not much was going on in there. We pretended he wasn't watching.

But infancy research of the 1990's opened the brain of the human infant to our inspection. Advances in psychneuroimmunology, developmental psychiatry, prenatal and perinatal psychology and neurology have shown us that the baby—perhaps even the preborn baby—is capable of observing her world, and struggling to make sense of it. What would it be like if we could listen in on his processing, to imagine his “thoughts”?

It's a terrifying notion, really. Much responsibility falls to the listener. Child welfare policy, birth practices, certain parts of medical care, even everyday child care practices are all challenged, once we are

rattled into imagining that the baby is fully present, and is actually responding to what we are doing.

For thirty-five years, I have been engaged in baby watching. For this privilege, I owe much, to many. Does this mean I am now blessed with a special understanding of the hearts of young ones? I don't think so. It merely means that I have been in the habit of looking carefully, and imagining, and that I want to share the habit with you, in the hope that your work as a parent, or a physician, or a therapist, or a child, will be enriched by the attempt to apprehend the meaning that experience has for infants and toddlers. It's worth our while to try, even if we fail, even if we're wrong.

This collection of baby verses, then, is offered as a glimpse into how some prenatates and infants and toddlers may look upon, interpret and integrate certain events in their lives. I have certainly focused on unhappy events, since it is these that usually caused

young children to be brought to my practice in the first place, for these many years. As you get into the habit of paying attention to the responses of little ones to their own lives, you will be able to add to this meager collection, and maybe your verses will be joyful ones.

So I have said that it doesn't matter if we're completely right about our observations, or whether we take note of mostly positive or mostly negative events. What matters is that we have deigned to listen, to wonder, to be enraptured by the way babies go about coping, adapting, understanding. We have tried.

An adult patient of mine, struggling to reconstruct some infantile memories, recently penned:

*If there is no voice
no sight
no sound
no way to
move the hands—
does that mean
there is nothing
important to be said?*

But she then followed these lines with this astonishing challenge, which became part of my motivation to put together this book: “So here is a thought, Michael. If I have to translate an event to you where I couldn't see, hear, speak, or move, what language do I use? How will you understand? *Do you speak that language?*” (italics mine).

Do we, indeed? The implication of this new habit of ours—of listening carefully, watching intently, wondering compassionately—is *that we think there is something important to be said*. And we might, with practice, be able to learn some of the language of babies. This could lead us to the possibility of learning, in real time, just how an infant or toddler is *making sense of his world*.


These poems, then, represent an old man's best guesses. What a frail offering. I have undoubtedly missed much, misunderstood much, even projected much. And I have utterly failed to champion, or even to decently represent, the parent's experience—or, for that matter, the experiences of other grownups and siblings who interact with babies as part of their normal lives and work.

This is just not their time. This is not about them.
This is about the babies. This collection is about giving
dignity to the baby's experience. Implicit herein is the
suggestion that we would gain much if we bent low to
watch, and to listen in ...

Michael Trout
The Infant-Parent Institute
Champaign, Illinois
Winter, 2007

PART one

PRENATAL LIFE



here's what you seem to think:
that i just lie here, like a hunk of ham
(and just as dumb)
floating in my mama's fluid
but essentially disconnected from her
and all that goes on in her life
and in your world out there.

i am blissfully unaware
not only because i am brainless and wired poorly
(and can't see so hot, which happens to be the
only true thing here)
but also because there is some kind of firewall
between me and thee.

well, guess again, bozos.

if there is a firewall
(don't you call it "the placental barrier"?)
it must be made in a sweat shop by highly
disgruntled workers
because it is *useless*.

1 inside
[awareness]

which is not a bad thing
because who said i want to be in here all alone, anyway?

i mean, it's already dark
and there's this constant, rhythmic thrumming
and the space is a little tight
and i can't talk to you in ways you will recognize
and i can't make anybody do anything from in here.

so i'm not asking for more isolation.

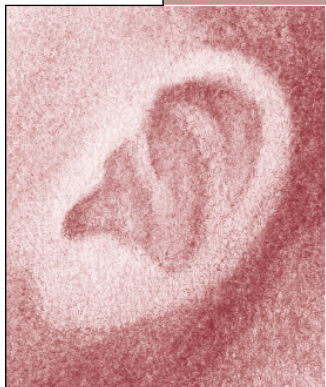
you might, however, give me *just a little credit*.

i hear your talking
i hear your yelling
i marinate in the juices of your fright
i know of your anger
i relish your contentment
i'm right next door during your lovemaking
i try not to say too much about that smoking
i love it when our movements get together

i am right there with you when your breathing speeds up
and it rattles me when you get nervous
and your heart races.

i know there is a certain sound out there
when you and *he*
are about to fight
and then your whole insides go crazy
and i get flooded with stuff from your body
that makes me afraid
and makes me want to run
or fight somebody
to keep us safe
(and i can't do anything at all
except get real quiet
or else kick until i get your attention
so *you* will do something).

and because all of this that we are going
through together
teaches me about life out there



and what i will need to get along
and to survive
i pay very close attention.

nature has prepared me to not ignore the lessons of experience.

and experience is what we are having here.

so i keep notes on things
to help me be better prepared next time.

things like:

“don’t make more trouble for mama.
she has all she can handle.”

“if that needle comes in again,
get outa’ the way!”

“maybe if you breathe real slow, mama will get the message
and slow herself down.

in that way, you are not so helpless;
you can help yourself by managing her.”

“now, when you get out there

don't cry.

these folks won't like that
and they might just go away,
and then where will you be?”

“you saw what happened when you tried
to get yourself born
by pushing and struggling to get free of that cord.
it just looped tighter around your neck.
so *stop moving.*

and,

“when you get out there, remember:
you can't do much about most things.
it's best to just give up,
before you make more trouble for yourself.”

“don't ever let anybody get control of you.
you don't ever want to feel the way you did
when people were boozing it up
and your body stopped working right,
or when someone gave your mother medicine
that made your legs go limp
and you couldn't move
or get away
or anything.

fight back.

kick.

get away.

don't sit still.

and don't let down your guard.
ever.”

“you, little one,
are the greatest thing since sliced bread.
they can't wait to see you
and pull you close to them,

where everything will be all right.
listen to them tell you so.”

“you are a worthless piece of nothing.
you came in here and just
made people upset and ruined things.
just go hide your face.”

“you were supposed to be somebody else.
it’s never going to work out,
because what is wrong with you is so basic
that it can never be corrected,
no matter how good
and helpful
and sweet
you try to be.
it’s *you* that is wrong.”

“there is always hope.
this container that holds me changes,

sometimes, in ways that are worrisome.
but it always returns to the center,
and everything becomes ok again.
things work in cycles,
and it makes sense to wait,
to be patient.”

beginning to get my point?

i am not an evolutionary imbecile.

i don’t know from motive
yet.

i just want to survive.
and part of survival is watching,
listening,
paying attention.

and then this best part:
writing this stuff down

learning lessons
and not forgetting where i've been.

i'm not saying the lessons will always make sense
to big people.

my parents
and my teachers
and my therapist
and that one foster mother
will try to talk me out of many of them
because the lessons i learned very early
are no longer applicable
(they say)
and i should stop being so afraid
or so angry
or so distant
and i shouldn't always run away
or give up
the way i do.

and those folks may be right.

excuse me if i am more than a little determined
to hold onto what i learned from my first experiences.

nature, remember, wanted me to make it
and makes me fierce about remembering the lessons
until the world out there
proves me wrong
(not *tells* me wrong; *proves* me wrong)
over and over
until i can relax
and learn a new lesson.

this is how i work.

and, all in all
(now that i have explained how sensible it is)
shouldn't we all be impressed
at what i can do?



2 breaking peaces

[domestic violence]

this is a story.
about what it's like in my world
when my mother gets frightened big time
and starts breathing fast
and something over by my left ear starts pumping,
LOUD and FAST:
thrum... thrum... THRUM... BOOM
and i can hear nothing else.
because somebody is hitting her,
and both she AND the somebody are screaming
and i don't know what's going to happen but
this i do know:
i can do exactly *nothing* about it.
nothing at all.
because i am not born yet.

this is a story about domestic violence—
or so i will learn many years from now
when i recognize the look in my girlfriend's eyes
after i've belted her one,
and suddenly i know where i've seen that look before.
she uses the words ("domestic violence")

for the first time.
and then i realize that i have,
to my horror,
become the perpetrator.

this is a story about me.
or, maybe it's about you.

so, are you laughing yet?
i mean, what can you learn about rage,
or terror,
or helplessness,
or rage and fear *about* the helplessness,
from a *baby*, for goodness sake?
much less from a baby who isn't even *born* yet?

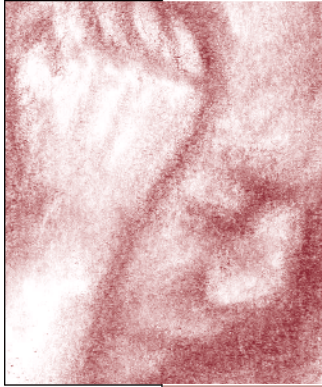
am i honestly telling you that this toxic brew
in which i marinate—
my mother's chemicals that are, of course,
also *my* chemicals,
because i live and breathe and eat everything *she* does—

is changing me from whoever i started out to be
into a child for whom *nothing* matters as much as ...
surviving?

a wonderful thing, when you think about it:
i was equipped to not just lie around
like a hunk of roast beef,
but to pay attention, to watch out, to figure out
how to cope.

i am programmed to survive.
problem is, when survival is about the only thing
a kid can put his mind to,
a kid becomes something different than she
started out to be.

maybe I'll learn to hide over here in the corner
of this place
so I won't make anything worse
and so I won't call any attention
to me.



or maybe I'll learn to do some shouting,
maybe even some hitting,
myself
so I don't have to always feel as if things are just happening
to me.

or maybe I'll become so watchful and wary
that people will call me a fidgety and nervous little kid.

the point is:
i'm going to do *something* to cope with the noise
and the unpredictability
and the sudden mood changes
and the long periods of weird silence
and the bursts of panic breathing and movement
and the feeling that something just god-awful is happening,
or is just about to happen,
and I don't know what it is but I had better find out so it doesn't
just snuff me.

so, excuse me if I seem a little self-centered about all this.
(by the way, one of my survival choices, later,

may be to become *such* an attentive and sweet little child,
who will serve your every whim
and who will know how you're feeling before you do.
tell you the truth, tho':
even that will be self-centered.
it will just be another way for me to survive,
by placating you
and him
and all the Hims I will meet later.)

oh, wait,
i was telling you i was sorry for being so preoccupied
with *me*
and my own survival, and all.
oh, screw it.
maybe I'm *not* sorry.

i mean, i didn't set the world up this way,
so that every second of every day everything is up for grabs.
things can change from hot to cold,
from peace to war, in a flash.

(and believe me, it's not *peace*
just because there's no war at the moment.
it's just a lull.
don't get used to it. and don't let down your guard.)

i'm not the one
who keeps bringing home smiling sticks of dynamite
over and over again.

i'm not the one who keeps buying all that
contriteness routine,
right after you just got your nose moved
to the other side of your face
and i'm in here thinking i can't breathe
and that i will *never* let this happen to me again
(only, of course,
just like you,
i will.)
by the way: why did you people have me, anyway?
just to lock each other in even more than you already were,
so *nobody* could escape?

well, you folks made this loony bin,
and i have to live in it,
and have it wash over me
and infiltrate every pore of my spirit,
and then i get to spend the rest of my days
trying to undo it.

maybe i'll just get tough as nails
and never cry
and figure out that males have power just *given* to them,
so i'll grab all there is and use it on somebody.
(or, if i turn out to be a girl,
maybe i'll cuddle right up to those powerful boys.)

maybe i'll be a short-tempered little brat
("i want what i want when i want it!")
because i'm more than a little tired of having everything
in my life controlled by others.

maybe i'll just give up.
because you know what?

giving up is actually like being in charge:
you never expect anything to turn out good,
and then things come out just like you said.

i will lie
to avoid trouble,
because i will never,
never
let trouble sneak up on me.
i'll do *anything* to avoid getting caught.

i'll act like *your* parent when i'm old enough
(you know, two or three years)
because that (catchin' on here, are you?)
means maybe i can steer things to come out better than
when *you* steer.

and since i will appear so grown up, it may seem odd to you
that i can't learn too well.
i'll fidget and look around and stare out the window
of my classroom.

whaddya' think: i'm going to *not* be on guard,
for even a minute?
i got left over energy or something for reading
and thinking about stuff that doesn't have to do with survival?

i'll be mad at *you* for not protecting me.
but, pretty soon, i won't even expect to be protected,
any more.
then i'll be mad at *dad* for being the way he is.
back and forth, back and forth,

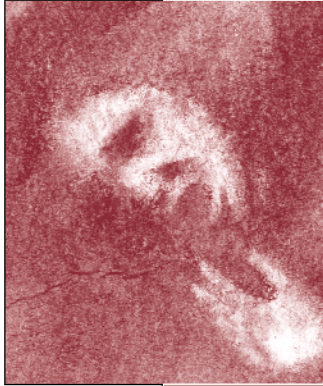
 'til i can't keep straight who's the good guy
and who's the bad guy.
i'll think that all families are like mine.
and then one day i'll figure out that they're not,
and i will keep that little discovery a total secret from
 everybody,
including me,
forever.

see, i want to have a family,
and it will occur to me one day

that i don't.
so i may just make one up
in my head,
or i'll make one of my own by getting pregnant real early.
or i'll join up with just about any group
that will have me and promise to stand up for me,
and even if they knock me around a little bit
it's okay, as long as i can still pretend
i've got something.

so, here's the deal:
domestic violence hurts kids,
including babies,
including babies that aren't even on the outside yet.
(geez, is this rocket science, or what?)

when grandpa screams at my mom
and calls her a dirty slut for getting pregnant,
and knocks her from wall to wall in the upstairs
hall one day,
does he forget who else is there?



yes, folks, it's *me*, also getting knocked from wall to wall.
and, while you may be thinking
that i'm too young to remember this,
do you know that i will start, that very day,
not trusting women?
because the most important woman in the world
is not keeping me safe.
(i know: she can't; but what's the difference, if you're me?)

how strange: when i'm 30, and still having lots of trouble
trusting women,
someone will finally ask me why i always say
that women are unreliable because they're always
"bouncing from one wall to the other".
and then i will know for sure:

i've been remembering that day in the upstairs hall
before i was even born.

and when i'm one,
and you and dad are screaming at each other

while i'm nursing,
would you like to guess what all i'm drinking in?

and when i'm two,
when my great love affair with the world is supposed to
 be in full bloom,
how am i supposed to show a little independence
and get interested in things out there,
when my every thought is about *you*
(or is it *me?* i can't seem to keep us straight)
and whether you're all right?
because there's some kind of connection
between *you* being all right,
and *me* being all right.

and when i'm three,
will you notice my very sad face?
or will you just think i'm being quiet and good that day?

well, are you sitting there wondering what you can do
 about me?

maybe not much, actually,
since i'll mostly be invisible to you,
until my reading problems,
and my punching kids on the playground,
and my hyperactivity
get your attention.

But, just in case you actually are a little interested,
work on getting it in your head,
somewhere where it can never slide out,
that babies — no matter if they're inside babies or
 outside babies,
or even if they are really old babies like one or two —
get hurt by domestic violence
just as much as if it were actually their own heads getting
 knocked off.

babies never forget.
we just get bigger.
and i'm thinking you may not like how we try to take back
what was taken from us.
twice over.



3 earning my keep

[rejection]

i am so sorry for taking up space.
i will try to be smaller
and ask for less.
i don't want to add to your burden
which seems to be considerable.
so i will just scrunch over here
in the corner of this already small space
and not make a peep.

i am beginning to understand that my
very presence
inside of you
is why you are upset so much.
you wish i were not here.
it seems that there are few things i can
change here
(since it is my *existence* that is the problem).
the least i can do, then, is to *not make any noise*.

(yes, i know: i can't actually make *any* noise
in here.
so i will just not move.
maybe you will let me stay if you forget that
i am here.)

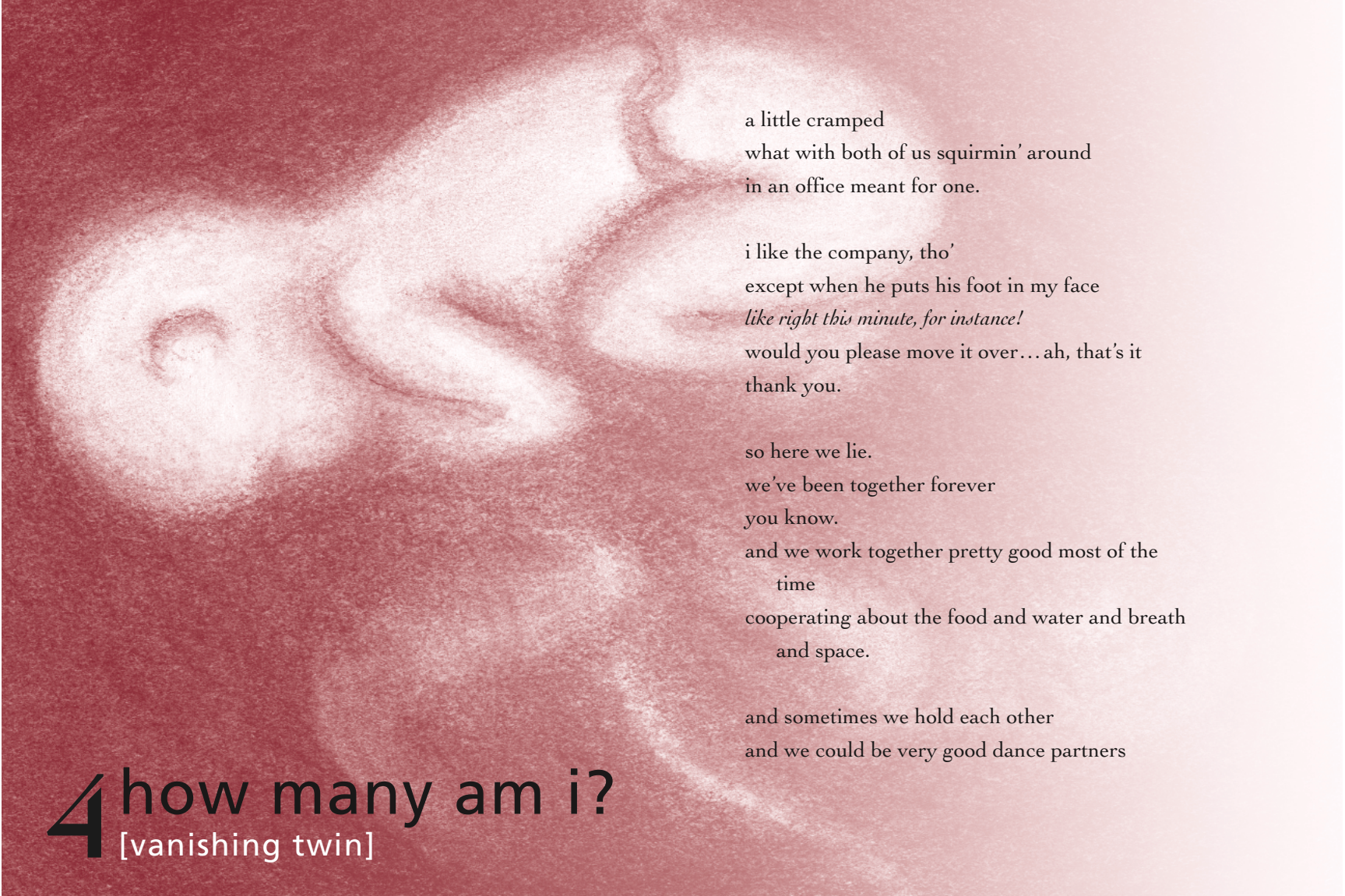
i am beginning to share your picture of me as a problem.
i am also beginning to wish that i did not exist.
(it will be many years before i shake those feelings.)

i don't know a thing about taking out the garbage for you
but i could learn to smile all the time
and do everything you ask
and always keep an eye out for when you are feeling sad
so that i could do something special for you.

i can learn to never let down my vigilance
about how you are doing.
and i can keep in mind that whether i get to stay
will always be dependent on my being good.

or maybe i should do us both a favor
and just stop being.
then you won't be fat, so your boyfriend will come back
and your dad will stop being so angry at you
and you will start eating again
and you can go back to school
and i can stop messing everything up for you.

i really am sorry.
i'll go over here in the corner of this small space
which has become way too large
and scrunch down
and stop...



a little cramped
what with both of us squirmin' around
in an office meant for one.

i like the company, tho'
except when he puts his foot in my face
like right this minute, for instance!
would you please move it over... ah, that's it
thank you.

so here we lie.
we've been together forever
you know.
and we work together pretty good most of the
time
cooperating about the food and water and breath
and space.

and sometimes we hold each other
and we could be very good dance partners

4 how many am i?
[vanishing twin]

(if this dance floor ever opens up a little
so a guy can breathe!)
because we have great rhythm together.

speaking of which
something has been off the last few hours.

he hasn't been moving right.

actually he hasn't been moving much at all
i don't see so good down here
but i can tell something's not right.

i shoved him a time or two
but nothing happened.
i don't like it.

is it getting darker in here, or is it just me?

this place is starting to feel a little lonely.

what has happened to my partner?
(or is it ME that it's happening to?
i can't actually tell the difference).

now it has been a few days.
part of me won't move.

part of me is starting to disappear
to break up
and go somewhere else in my mother's body.

am i falling apart?
will i always fall apart
when the one nearest me stops moving?
i hate this!

i can't do anything about what's happening
i just lie here
and he drifts away
and i watch



as lifelessness fills the space
where my brother used to be.

i'm not sure whether we used to be two
or we were one.

but it's going to be a long time
before i let myself get in this situation again
where half of you can just break off and be gone.

i long for the part of me that's missing
but i am afraid to pair up again
'cause this stinks.

but then again
i'm afraid to be alone too.

will i ever get used to this?

PART **two**

BIRTH AND

PERINATAL LIFE



my first breath
was at my mother's expense
or so she would later tell me
over and over.

is that what i also felt at the time i took it
(that breath)
rejoicing at its newness
and its deliciousness
then suddenly filled with shame
was i
for what i took
from her
to have it?

5 twenty-five yards of gauze
[birth shame]

she said it took twenty-five yards of gauze
to mop up the awful bloody mess
made by me
while busting out of there.

was i too big for my own good?
was she holding me in
unable to see me as something she could give up
without losing her Self?

either way
wanna' guess how long those very first feelings
would stay with me?

i didn't mean to hurt you, mama
would you feel better if i climbed back in?
would it be good enough for me to promise
"i'll never make a mess again"?



let me get this straight.
there's a rumor going 'round the newborn
nursery, here,
that what you wanna' do
is strap me down on a board,
then take something real sharp
and make me bleed on the end of my thingie
down there.

the reason you wanna' do this
is so i don't get embarrassed,
years from now,
in case i see all the other boys you've *already*
done it to,
at a pool or something,
and i feel different.

6 let me get this straight

[circumcision]

well, hello!

i do believe i can stand that kind of differentness.

oh, you have a second reason:

of all the various cracks and crevices in my little body,
you have concluded that i can't keep *this particular one*
clean.

(do other people laugh when you make this argument?
isn't anybody listening to the absurdity of this?!)

so, for these two eloquently-stated and perfectly
rational reasons,

you wanna' whack off the end of my thingie.

and you wanna' call it an actual "medical procedure"
(instead of "ancient and truly bizarre tribal ritual"),

i guess because insurance doesn't pay so good for tribal
rituals

even when they are done in hospitals

by large people wearing masks.

oh, there's one more thing.

you wanna' do this thing to me,

while i'm strapped down to a board

(what? so i won't take that sharp thing away from you
and see how you like having body parts removed that you
might actually *like*?)

with no pain medicine

because you have decided that it won't hurt me.

oh, boy.

do you guys sit around in a room somewhere
and just split a gut at how stupid people are
when they believe this stuff?

i advise you not to tell my parents about this,
'cause i know for absolutely sure

that my dad would not stop laughing at your truly great
idea

until at least next tuesday,

which would be just about how long

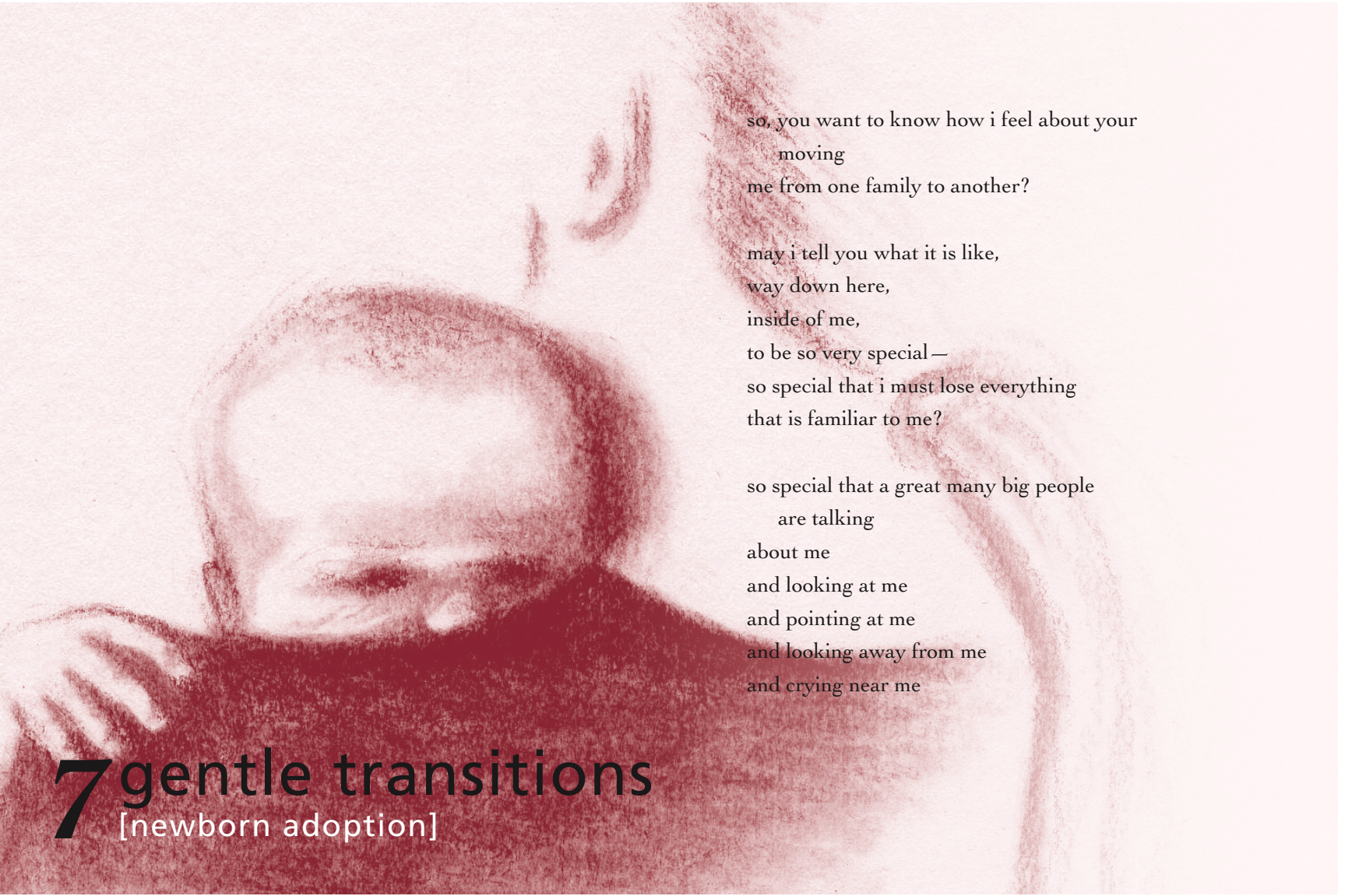
my mom would torture you

for even *thinking* about doing any such thing
to her new baby boy
(otherwise known as *me*,
an actual person, here!).

what kind of world
would make up stuff like this to do to babies?
knowing perfectly well that we can't defend ourselves,
and knowing that a guy's body doesn't exactly forget
 about something like this.
i mean, how smart do you have to be
to think that starting life off with an act of sexual violence
might not be the best way to prevent sexual violence later,
or to build sweetness in boys,
or to help boys not be defensive
about their masculinity,
or to help boys not be completely obsessed with whether
 their thingie down there is ok,
so they touch it about 150 times a day?
(this is *not* rocket science.)

could we make some sort of an arrangement, here?
you use your knife to make a good salad or something,
and i will not only wash myself every day,
but i will actually *rejoice* in my differentness.

and i will not grow up
wanting to threaten people back
who make me feel scared and helpless
again.



so, you want to know how i feel about your
moving
me from one family to another?

may i tell you what it is like,
way down here,
inside of me,
to be so very special—
so special that i must lose everything
that is familiar to me?

so special that a great many big people
are talking
about me
and looking at me
and pointing at me
and looking away from me
and crying near me

7gentle transitions
[newborn adoption]

so much that i am losing my own sense of who i am
and where i belong
and what i am supposed to do
to keep myself safe.

when you look at me
i wonder if you know that i am really here?
do you understand that i am *watching*?
do you understand that
all of the papers you are signing,
all of the decisions you are making,
all of the ways you are behaving
are noticed by me,
that i am affected by all of it,
and that i won't forget?

thank you for noticing that
i am not simply a hunk of ham lying here—
a beautiful hunk of ham, to be sure,
and undoubtedly very precious

and beautiful to behold and much wanted by all
and really quite “special” and all that—
but a hunk of ham nonetheless.

thank you for imagining
(i know this is hard for you)
that i am something else.

i am not a something with language,
but you had better know that i have some things to say
and i *will* find a way to say them.

i am something very different from you,
but not necessarily less than you.
and so i hope that you will not confuse your
feelings and your thoughts
for *my* feelings and *my* thoughts.

and i really do thank you for asking.



first of all,
if you are going to do this thing,
if you are going to have me go
through this great, huge change,
then please let my birthmother and my birthfather
be *sure*.

the last thing this world needs
is another baby jessica or baby richard mess.
(i knew about both of them.
who finally won there?)
make sure everybody gets a chance to say
what they *really* want.

make sure everybody gets a chance
to *know* what they really want.
make sure they get a chance to *see* me.
don't play that hide-and-seek game,
where everybody pretends that
if you keep my birthmother and my birthfather from
looking at me,

they will go away,
they will be able to forget
and they won't cause any trouble.

second, give my new mother and my new father —
my adoptive parents —
a chance to be pregnant for me.

let them get to know me
while i am still inside my birthmother.
let them learn about whether my birthfather
likes his pancakes crispy or fluffy,
and what my birthmother's favorite sport is,
and what both of them thought about me.
so these new people can know me better
when i come out.
and so they can help *me* know me better too.

it would be best if you could go
through most of this process
of bringing me into the world *together*:

then we might all feel so connected
that the grownups could concentrate on what is best
for *me*.

not on their own loss.
or their fear of loss.

remember, it helps me
if my new parents can get relaxed,
so they don't act funny around me —
either not letting themselves have
too many feelings for me,
or having feelings that drown me.

don't any of you forget:
i am really not something you can *own*.
it doesn't feel good at all to me
for you to fight over me.

my voice feels so small, even to me,
when you forget all about me
and start treating me like a *thing* —

a thing to be negotiated over,
a thing to possess,
a thing that causes perfectly sane grownups to act
like jealous and mean little children.

(did I mention before that
the last thing the world needs
is another baby jessica or baby richard mess?)

third—and this only works
if you were paying attention
to what i said the first and second things were—
notice what you are doing
when you hand me from one to the other.
have some kind of a ritual or something
that will make all of you feel like this thing is real,
and permanent,
and so you will never forget it
for the rest of your life.

but also so that you will remember
why you are doing this.

this ritual thing doesn't have to be somber,
unless that is what all of you really think you need.
it could also be playful.

it seems as if it *ought* to be joyful:
after all, if you all are not extremely happy
about this huge thing you are doing,
then why in the world are you doing it?

i am not asking you to pretend.
(although pretending is not such a bad thing to do around
a little baby,
who sometimes gets very confused
watching all of your faces and trying to figure
what they mean
and whether you are all right
and whether i am all right.)

but what i *am* asking you to do is
to make the giving of me
from one of you to the other a very official thing,
because i don't want you to go back on it later.
that would hurt me a lot.
(i can't believe i am having to tell you this.)

and i am asking you *all* to show honor
and love
for each other.

finally, please don't ask me to pretend
that i love one of you more than the other.
don't ask me to forget my birthmother
or my birthfather.
don't ask me to think of my adoptive parents
as anything less than my real parents.

don't ask me to not talk about things
because they make you feel uncomfortable.
for crying out loud, we were all *there*.

we all know what happened.
so how about we pry this thing open
and act a little more like *all* of us are in it together?

there are some things you need to *just let happen*:
sometimes i will have the weirdest flashes
of what it felt like
to move around inside my birthmother.
sometimes i will miss that.

sometimes i will wonder why you,
my new parents,
don't smell or look or taste or act or feel like the
people i grew up with
(for the first nine months of my life or so).

some days i won't remember my birthmother
at all.
that doesn't mean i am disloyal.
it just means i've got other fish to fry.



actually

i wish that none of you would ever expect me

to prove my loyalty to you.

that is really not my job.

it is your *job* — all of you —

to pull yourself together

so that you feel okay about yourself

and you don't have to get me to work it out for you.

i can't fill up that part of you that is empty,

or scared,

or lonely,

or feels like you might lose me.

(actually

i probably *could* do some of those things,

but i really don't want to.

and it is not my job.)

please fill your own holes

so you can help me be whole.

if you want to know what i am feeling —
or whether i am feeling —
awk me.
see how i am sleeping.
what, and how, i am eating.
do i look at you?
do i let you cuddle me?
or do i protect myself from the pain of losing you
by never letting myself have you in the first place?

as i grow up, please try very hard to let me be
an everyday kid.
and don't ever forget that i am not.
forget all about where i came from.
but don't ever forget where i came from.
(this is a tall order, isn't it?)

remember that if i see you —
my adoptive parents
who now feel like just my parents —

fighting,
i am pretty likely to freak out.

after all, splits of any kind are a little bit
too familiar to me.

i may do some weird stuff like climbing
inside your pajamas,
or only wanting to watch tv in that mummy
sleeping bag you are going to give me
for my fourth birthday,
or even rolling myself up in rugs
and having you lie on top of me.

because a part of me really wishes
that *you* could birth me,
or i could sort of be born in you.
(see what i mean about how you can't really ever
forget that i'm not an everyday kid?
and that i still want you to?)

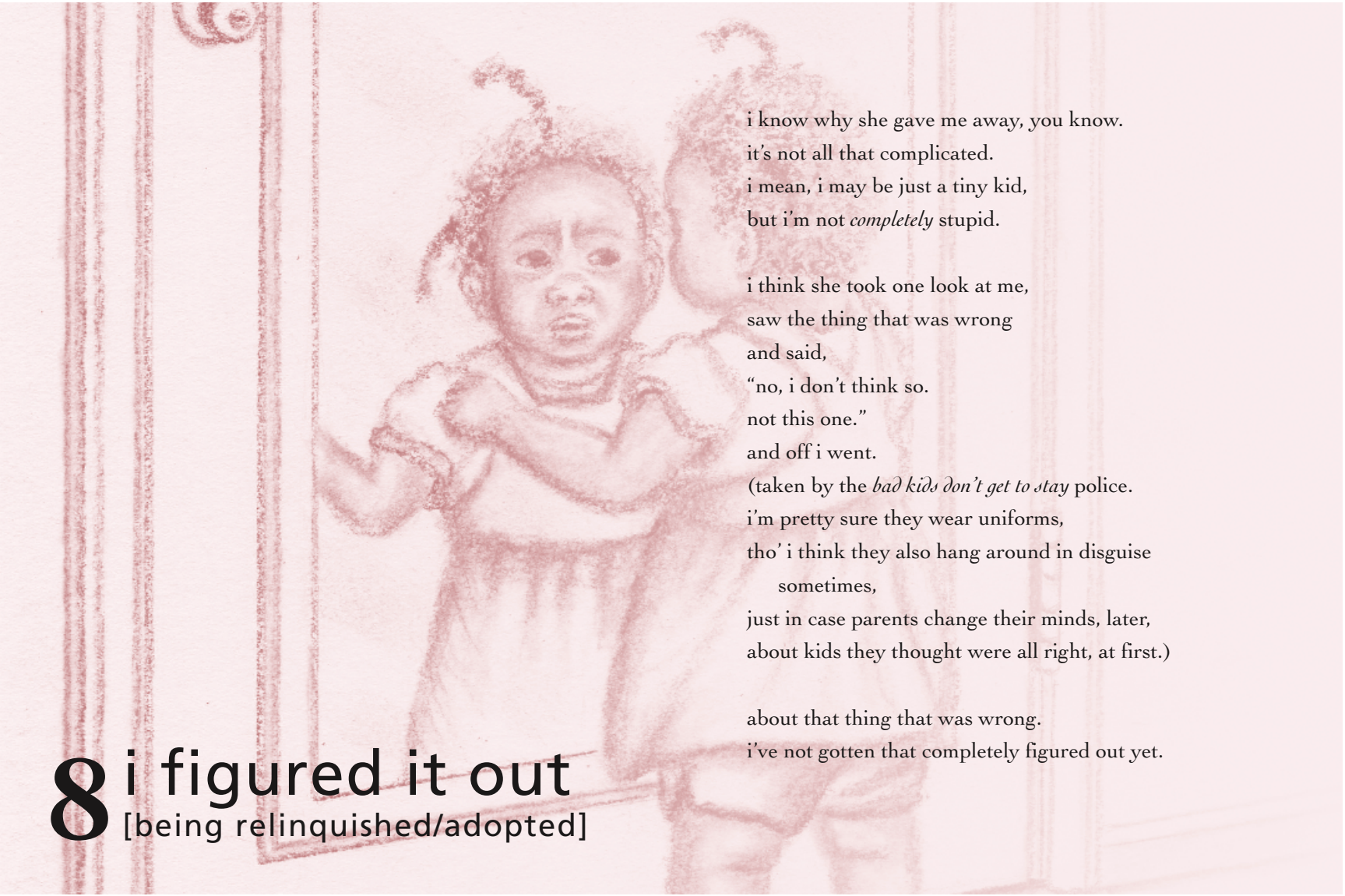
and i might take some things from your dresser
when i am six,
and you might start to think i am a terrible thief.
because i am adopted.
because i have terrible genes from somewhere
back there.

remember: the biggest thing in my life
is to figure out how to make connections stick.
and sometimes the way i know how to do that is
to hold onto things
that belong to people i care about.
i don't mean to steal *from* you.
i mean to take you *with* me.

so
that's about it.
you asked me to tell you how it looks
from down here
when you move me from one family to another.

i think you really meant it
when you asked me how all of you could do it
just right for me.
i want to tell you one more time
that i am glad you asked,
and i hope you won't be ticked off
when i tell you that it is about freakin' time
that you asked.
i know that you all mean well.
you probably always did.
but you haven't always acted so smart,
and you have often acted
as if i was not even here. . . and watching.
i'll take your having asked about all of this
as a sign that things are going to change for me and
all of my brother and sister adoptees.
thank you for your courage
and your unselfishness.

i'll be seeing you around.
forever.



8 i figured it out
[being relinquished/adopted]

i know why she gave me away, you know.
it's not all that complicated.
i mean, i may be just a tiny kid,
but i'm not *completely* stupid.

i think she took one look at me,
saw the thing that was wrong
and said,
"no, i don't think so.
not this one."
and off i went.

(taken by the *bad kids don't get to stay* police.
i'm pretty sure they wear uniforms,
tho' i think they also hang around in disguise
sometimes,
just in case parents change their minds, later,
about kids they thought were all right, at first.)

about that thing that was wrong.
i've not gotten that completely figured out yet.

i do think about it every single day.
and i try to make myself over,
to make sure it doesn't show again
(and *zip*, there would come those police!)
which is pretty hard,
since I'm not exactly sure which of my badnesses she saw
that day (my very last day with her).

I'm getting quite good at reading my new mother's face
for any sign of displeasure or disappointment.
then i just change whatever i'm doing
and *presto!* the police don't come.
and i get to stay.

pretty slick deal, eh?

the other day it, like, totally fell apart tho'.
i wasn't quick enough on the draw
and she actually *got* disappointed in me
and i flipped out and got scared and started yelling
and sobbing

and i made my whole body still.
for just a moment there,
i thought it was happening all over again.
they were going to come,
and this new mom was going to tell them about me,
and then they would all hang their heads
and make clucking sounds in their mouths
and put me right out of that place.

just to show you how crazy i became,
i actually felt *mad* for a minute there.
whew! i caught that one just in time.
next time, i will stay in control.
i won't tell *anyone* that i'm mad,
and i won't let *anyone* see what's inside me.
it's just too icky.

that's what i learned that day from my first mother.
and i won't forget.
she sure helped me,
i guess.

PART three

INFANCY AND

TODDLERHOOD



here's what being a boy baby is like
(tho' you must understand i actually don't have much
to compare it to).

it means your mom and you are *real* close
and then she changes
and starts making you hold your own bottle
and she doesn't cuddle you as close
and she says, "big boys don't cry for their mommies".

9 being a boy baby
[gender]

it means your daddy says,
“you’re going to make him into a *girl* if you keep
that up!”
(whatever *that* means—but it’s evidently not good).

what did i do wrong?
things were pretty good
(i thought).
i thought they liked me
(the way i was)
but it seems they want me to be somebody else now.

i will certainly give it a try
because i don’t want to lose them
or even disappoint them.

but i won’t forget this feeling that everything can be ok
and then it’s not
and you don’t know what happened
except that you are no longer acceptable
and so you better figure out who to be
and *be* him
quick as can be
or else
the end.



10 being smart

[domestic violence/alcoholism]

wanna' know how smart i am?

i am so smart that i know ahead of time
when my parents are going to start fighting
again.

you say i can't because i am only one
but i know just how my dad's footsteps sound
when he's coming up the front walk
drunk
so this is going to be *real* bad
bad enough that i should go into my room
and climb into my crib and hide or shut up at least
and when my dad is coming up the walk
happy
so he and mom will hug
or at least not yell and scream and scare me to death
pretty good, eh?

i also know when mama is having a good day
and when she is having one of those days
when i should learn how to heat up my own bottle

because it sure isn't going to come from her
because of *the great sadness*.

i also know when my precious little smile
will cure everything
and when i can get right between them
and they will *stop fighting*
and when dad will let me crawl up on his lap
and he gets real emotional
and says "oh, sweetie, your mom and i
don't mean to be so hard on you"
and then we just cuddle there and he holds me too tight
but i don't mind i guess.

and when i should act big and feed myself
because my mom loves it when i don't need her.

and when i should act little and helpless
because my mom needs a tiny baby that day.

and when i don't need to act at all.

i don't *take* naps of course
because then i couldn't watch things
and be ready.

at night i dream of being blind.
i wake up screaming
because not being able to see
means not being alert
and ready for things.

i could never allow that to happen.

one night i dreamed (oh boy this was great)
that i was lying in a giant hammock.
i was surrounded by happy people
who were smiling and just swinging me
and every time i tried to get out so i could help them
they told me to just lie back and *relax little one*
we will take care of everything.

i was very scared to let them be in charge this way
and i hardly knew how to just lie back



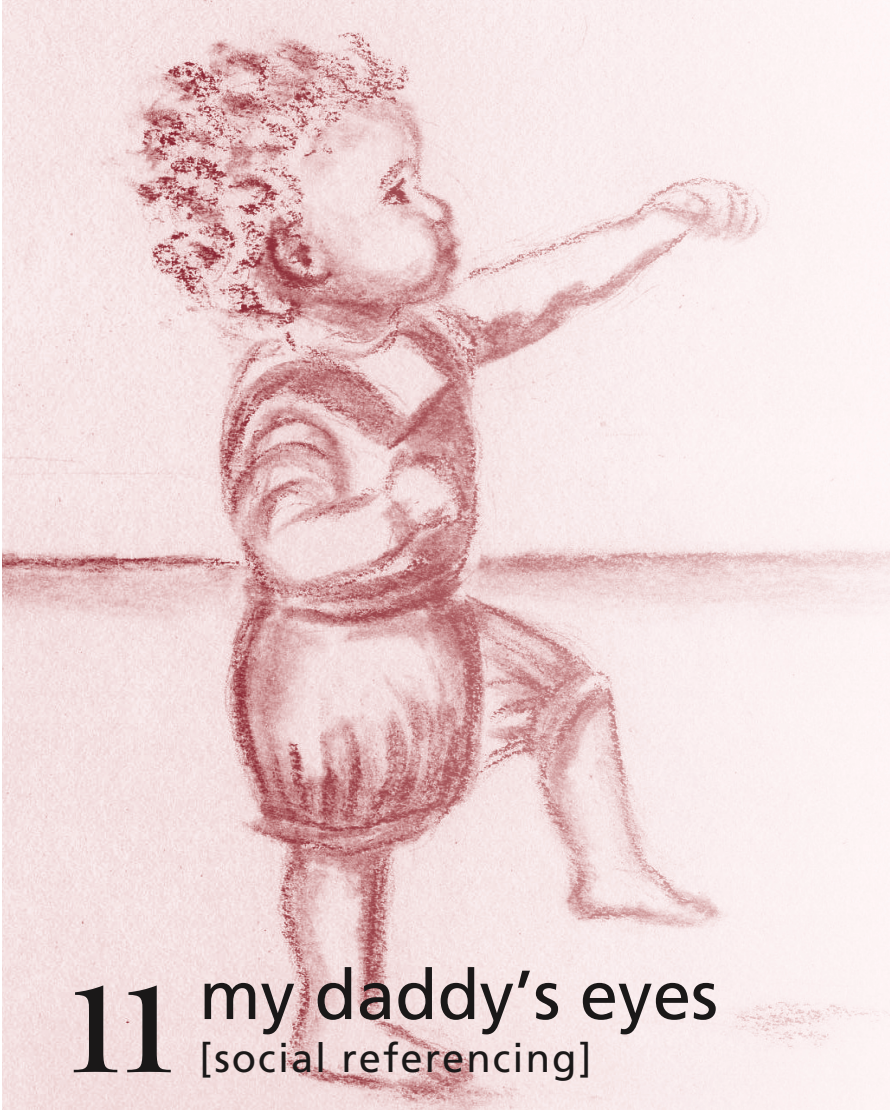
and not even watch their faces to see if they were ok
or if i had better get it in gear.

it felt very strange
and then very wonderful
and right there in that hammock
i started to bawl so hard i could not stop
and they just kept swinging me
gently
back and forth
and my body felt so peaceful
i thought every muscle had gone limp.

then i woke up

silly baby

stay awake
stay alert
be smart
or you know what



11 my daddy's eyes

[social referencing]

i can't walk
yet
but my daddy's eyes say that i can
and when i look into them
i know that he knows about these things.

he has ridden the warrior stallion
down the ridges of scotland
and into noble battle
with the majestic sound of bagpipes
lilting across the moors.

actually, he may have never left indiana.

but his eyes
my daddy's eyes
say that he has
and that i can.

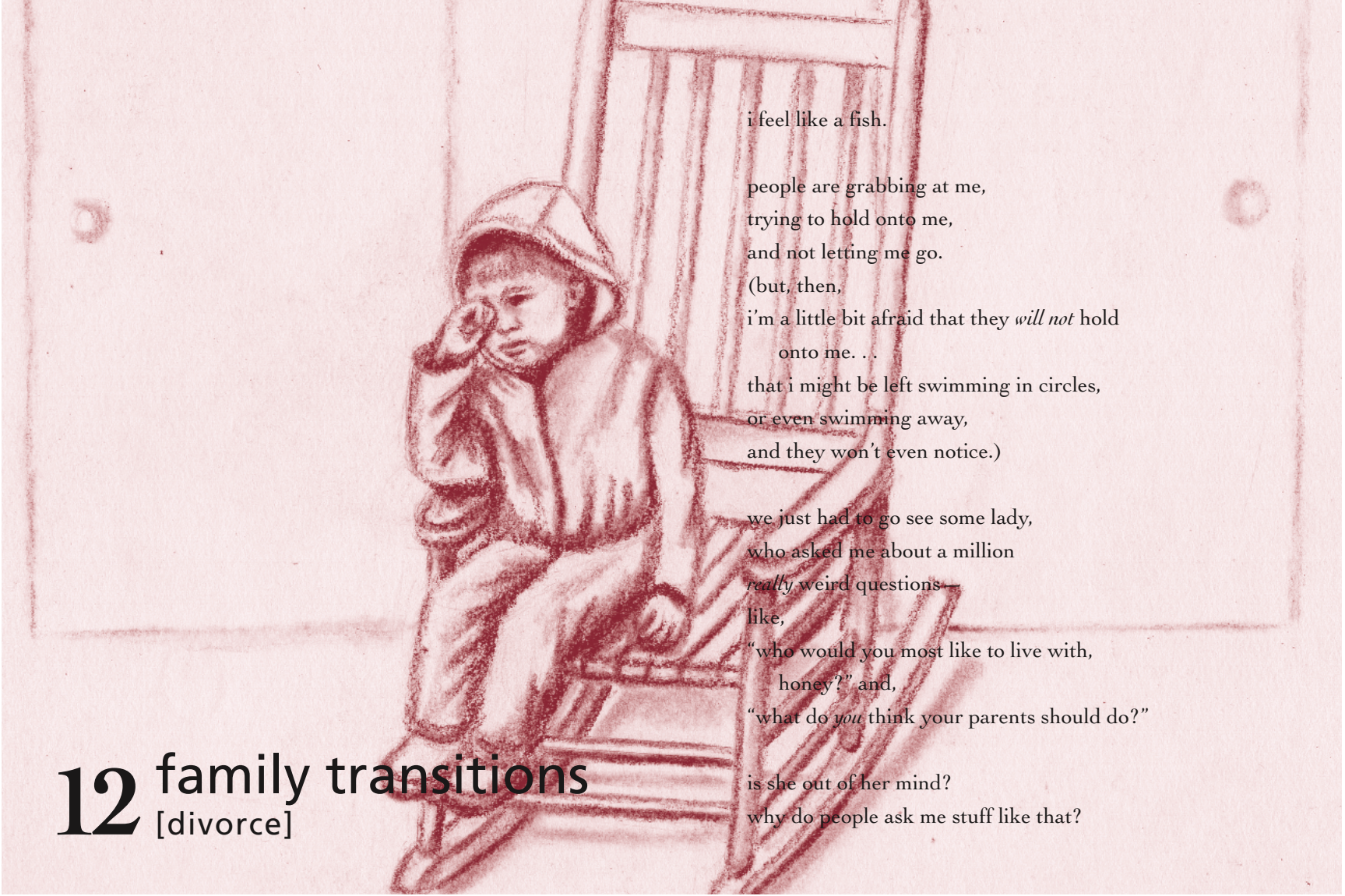
i am of him.

i swallow his assurance
where it can better duke it out
with my scaredness
and i rise

i stand...

i step...





12 family transitions

[divorce]

i feel like a fish.

people are grabbing at me,
trying to hold onto me,
and not letting me go.

(but, then,
i'm a little bit afraid that they *will not* hold
onto me. . .

that i might be left swimming in circles,
or even swimming away,
and they won't even notice.)

we just had to go see some lady,
who asked me about a million
really weird questions—

like,

“who would you most like to live with,
honey?” and,

“what do *you* think your parents should do?”

is she out of her mind?

why do people ask me stuff like that?

don't they know there *are* no answers that work?
there *are* no answers that make everybody happy at the
same time,
there *are* no answers that get me
what i *really* want?

i mean, i know this lady is supposed to be some kind of
"custody evaluator,"
or something like that,
but it makes my brain swell up
when i have to think about the nutty stuff that my parents
are doing.

what do they want me to say?
how about: that all the grownups in my life should stop
acting so stupid?
that people should stop trying to make
like everything is going to be all right,
when i know perfectly well that it is *not*,
and i just want everything to go back to the way it
was before,

except without the yelling
(and the silence).

that i *don't* think it is okay for me
to be going back and forth all the time
between two houses.

except that i also don't think it is okay
to not see my dad *or* my mom
(so i don't really *have* a choice)?

that it seems
i'm the one doing most of the adjusting
around here,
and nobody asked me if i wanted to?

that all the adults seem to be getting
what they want,
and i don't even remember what i want anymore?
all right, for about the zillionth time,
i am going to try to act like a grownup



for a few minutes
and answer your question.
("tell me, sweetie, what do you think about your parents'
divorcing?")

it's weird, you know:
about half the time you all act
like i am invisible,
and what i say couldn't possibly matter less;
the other half of the time you are all over me like a heat rash,
asking me what i think and what i feel,
and i don't really know.
and i can't even breathe very well.

but,
you are asking,
so i'll give it a try.

first of all,
i gotta' tell you that the grownups in my world
aren't, very

(grown up, that is).
they pout, and act snotty
and throw things
and they don't share at all.
i can't figure out how they get away with this.
i sure couldn't.

sometimes i wish i was about eleven feet tall,
so i could give you all a good smack
and *make* you be nicer to each other.

sometimes i think up other ways to imagine
that i have the power to make things normal,
even though mostly i know that i can't.
i try to be extra nice,
and help with stuff.

the other day i made a terrible mess trying to fix you
some ovaltine,
because i thought that would make you less nervous.
and then you would be nicer to my mom

when she came over
to get the rest of her stuff out of the desk —
except then, suddenly,
boom!
mom would figure out that
she doesn't want to get the rest of her stuff out of the desk
because you are so nice
and so you start hugging
and kissing
and smiling.

in my dream about this,
i am standing between the two of you
with this big old grin on my face,
because i got you to be nice, with ovaltine.

(and then i glue you together when you are not looking).

other times, i get real frustrated
because nothing i do has any effect at all,
on *anything*.

sometimes i am sort of glad about that,
because i really just want to go out and play
and forget all about grownups and their troubles.
then i am even kind of relieved that i am small.

at these times,
i know that none of it was my fault,
which feels good.
(but who wants it to be not your fault
when that also means you are completely helpless?
see what i mean,
about how confusing this can get?)

you know, you haven't been such a hot parent
since you two broke up.
you laugh a little bit too loud,
sometimes,
and i can't tell who you are.

i guess i *should* like it that you take me to
the custard cup now,

which you hardly ever used to do.
but it gets me mixed up.

you stare off into space, a lot.
boy, can you be moody.

you kiss me in a slobbery way,
and you hug me about four seconds too long.

and you let me stay up way too late,
when i know it is against the rules at my "other house."
or you make me go to bed too early
and actually i think you are just tired of me.

you say, "i'm sorry"
too much.

other times,
you act like i am just a picture on the wall
and that none of this affects me
and that i can't really tell what it going on.

didn't you even wonder how it was
that i started barfing
whenever we had hot dogs,
which i really like
but which reminded me of two summers ago
(before the divorce)
when we went camping
all together,
as a family
and laughed *a lot*
and ate about a million hot dogs,
together?

didn't you think it was a little strange
that all of a sudden i started crying
and clutching at you
when you took me to daycare in the morning?
or when i started acting like i didn't even notice
when you came to pick me up in the evening
(because, to tell you the truth,
i didn't want to have to figure out
who was picking me up today,

and how i was supposed to feel about that,
and who i was going to stay with tonight,
and a lot of other confusing stuff)?

i don't mean to complain.
i'm sorry.
please don't get moody and go away. . .

how about a new washing machine?
i heard you and dad yelling at each other a few weeks ago
about how you are sick and tired
of doing a hundred loads of
laundry every week
and trying to keep up with all us kids,
and he never helps at all.

so, if *that's* why you are getting a divorce,
boy, have *i* got an answer!

(i'm saving up, but until i have enough money,
i will just keep hiding my own dirty clothes
under my bed.)



i wish i could stop feeling so cranky.

last night i woke up wondering
if you would think that i was such a pain
that you would *both* leave me.

hey! that would be something you could agree on!
maybe you would stay married to each other
and just divorce *me*.
(speaking of nighttime,
i don't like how i feel
at night *at all*.)

did you notice me running away from you
at the mall last week?
i don't know what made me do it,
but i think i was playing a game
where i was in charge
of whether you disappear or not,
and i could *make* you come back
just by coming out of hiding, *myself!*

the other day i heard a kid at preschool tell another kid
that his parents were getting divorced.
he said his dad was going to come back
and see him every single saturday
even if he had to use an air force helicopter.
i told him that was stupid,
that the air force won't let you use their helicopters.
then i told him
(i don't know why)
that my parents were never going to get divorced,
but my mom did *have* to go to saudia arabia
for a while
on a big oil deal.
only the president can decide
when she can come back.

did you know that your voice sounds exactly the same
when you are griping about bad stuff
that mom did,
as it does
when you are griping to me about bad stuff
that i do?

i wish you wouldn't talk about mom that way because,
for some reason,
i can't keep it straight when you are mad at her
and when you are mad at *me*.

are you still going to cook me oatmeal and put
peaches in it?

the first thing i do when i come back
from time with my
"other parent"
is check the refrigerator,
because i want to know
if you are still
remembering to go to the store,
and stuff like that.

what do you think of my new trick
of climbing into bed with you, in the night?
ha!
now you can't sneak away when

no one is looking
cause you are so mad
you want to run off to Ethiopia,
(or other stuff i have been hearing you say
on the phone lately).
fooled you!

that's why the baby talk,
and why my nose runs all the time,
and why i started peeing my bed again.
maybe, if i seem enough like a
tiny baby to you,
you won't forget me.

since you asked,
ok, here is some good stuff you could do.

first, i am not a fish
so don't try to bait me,
or hook me,
or eat me.

i am also not a toy for anybody to own.
actually, i sort of liked feeling "owned"
by both of you, before,
when we were a together family.
but you messed that up pretty good.
so now, when you quibble about
taking possession of me,
it makes me feel weird,
like you are trying to cut me in half or something.

second, quit trying to make me
be on your side.
how can i be on everybody's side,
all at once?
being disloyal makes me feel
like i am going to throw up.
also, please tell grandma to stop trying
to make me say bad things about mom.

third, if you are going to divorce,
then stop acting like you are still married

and still getting upset with each other,
(like at the mcdonald's parking lot
the other night).
i mean, you might as well still be married,
if you are going to act like that!
if you got divorced because you were unhappy,
then you are supposed to be more happy now.
so act nice to each other,
at least when i have to watch you.

fourth, don't ever tell me
(again)
that i'll have to go live with my other parent
if i don't stop misbehaving.

one last thing

i'm pretty sure it would help if you stop
trying to control each other.
just mind your own business.
(i can't believe i said that.)

well, there's lots more i could say,
but i'm bored with this right now.
so i'm going to go outside, and swing,
and get into my pretend world—
where i forget that you've all
gone looneytunes.

how about you just remember to
honor my mother
and
honor my father.

i mean, you may be dumping each *other*;
but i need you *both* to be my parents,
for the whole time i'm a kid.

and even after that.

13 ghostbusters
[fear/fantasy]



i am scared of ghosts.

alright, i am obsessed with ghosts.

actually, i don't even know what "scared" means,
much less "obsessed",
because i am *way* too little.
but not knowing what they mean
does not stop me from being them
(scared and obsessed, that is).

see, i talk about ghosts all the time.
i hold a little cutout picture of a ghost
(that my dad gave me)
up in front of my eyes,
and i make it dance for me,
while i stare.

i bring up ghosts at breakfast
(usually, i guess, when it doesn't have anything to do
with what everyone else is talking about,

which must be why everybody stops talking
and stares at me, like i'm from mars or someplace —
which, by the way, might just be true)
and while we're driving along in the car,
and during my bath,
and just about anytime i can.

because ghosts are on my mind all the time.

my favorite toy this summer
was a long piece of black plastic tubing
that i found by the woodpile.
i put my scoobie-doo dolls in it over and over again,
and waited them to roll out the other end.
then i rejoiced.
because they made it out,
looking just like when they went in.
they were safe.
(i am never sure about this
with tunnels.)



i call this favorite game of mine “ghostblasters”.
everyone thinks this is because
that’s the name of a ride i really like
at snoopy land. (my dad takes me there.)
that’s what i usually say, too,
when people ask me why i talk about ghosts all the time,
and what’s this about “ghostblasters”?

that’s not really it, tho’.

the truth is that my life is full of ghosts.
i don’t even know where i come from.
i don’t know what my birthmother looked like.
or why she gave me away.
or what life was like during the *long* time
i lived with her, inside.
did she like me when i was in *there*?
when did she stop?
do i look like her? (do i look like *anybody*?)
when did she figure out that i was broken
(so that she didn’t want to keep me)?

and during that *long* time
(almost as long as i lay inside my birthmother)
that i lay on a big bed,
with about a hundred and fifty other babies
in the foster home
(all staring up at the ceiling,
waiting for a mother to come),
what happened to my brain?

(i'm pretty sure it's broken,
along with the rest of me.
i can't concentrate very well
and i stare off in space *lots*
and i watch fans spin around
and i leave almost every place i am —
even tho' my body stays.)

oh, i was telling you about ghosts, wasn't i?
well, maybe you won't understand,
but ghosts are everywhere in my life.
because there are *way* more questions

than anyone has answers for.
(mostly i'm afraid to ask them, anyhow.
i don't want to upset folks.
and i can hardly clear the smoke for long enough
to figure out what the questions even *are!*)

so i wander around bumping into things,
quite unable to make my heart stop pounding so hard,
quite helpless to figure out *anything*,
feeling defective,
out of place,
and surrounded by mysteries.

i would love to have a ghostblaster.
then, with one giant *pow*
i could make the smoke clear
and everything would be known.

who i am.
who was she.
who is she (and where is she) now.

why do i live here.
when will i be thrown away again.
(when is the next time i will enter the tunnel and,
when i come out the other end,
nobody will be there.)

i do like that ride at snoopy land.
and i do like to go on it with my dad.
but my world has been ghostly since i first came into it.
and i would really like to blast them.

there is one problem, however.
if i stop daydreaming,
if I stop living in ghostland,
maybe i will never see my mom.
i will lose whatever foggy link i have
to that place,
that time,
where i come from.



14 i wiggled

[sexual abuse]

did you know that i'm a slut?
well, actually, i don't know that word yet.
but i know the idea of it,
and i know that i am one.
(it won't be until i'm in the third grade
that i will actually learn the word,
from the girls on the playground,
sing-singing it at me.
but i will know they're right,
so i won't say nothin' back to them.)

see, when i sit on my uncle's lap,
i feel hardness under me.

it used to scare me some.
but now i know just what to do to make
it happen.
and so, that makes me in charge of
when it happens.
which is better than not being in charge.

except that it means i am a slut.
which, i think, is good (tho' i'm not at all sure).
then why do i feel so bad?
oh, brother, this is confusing.

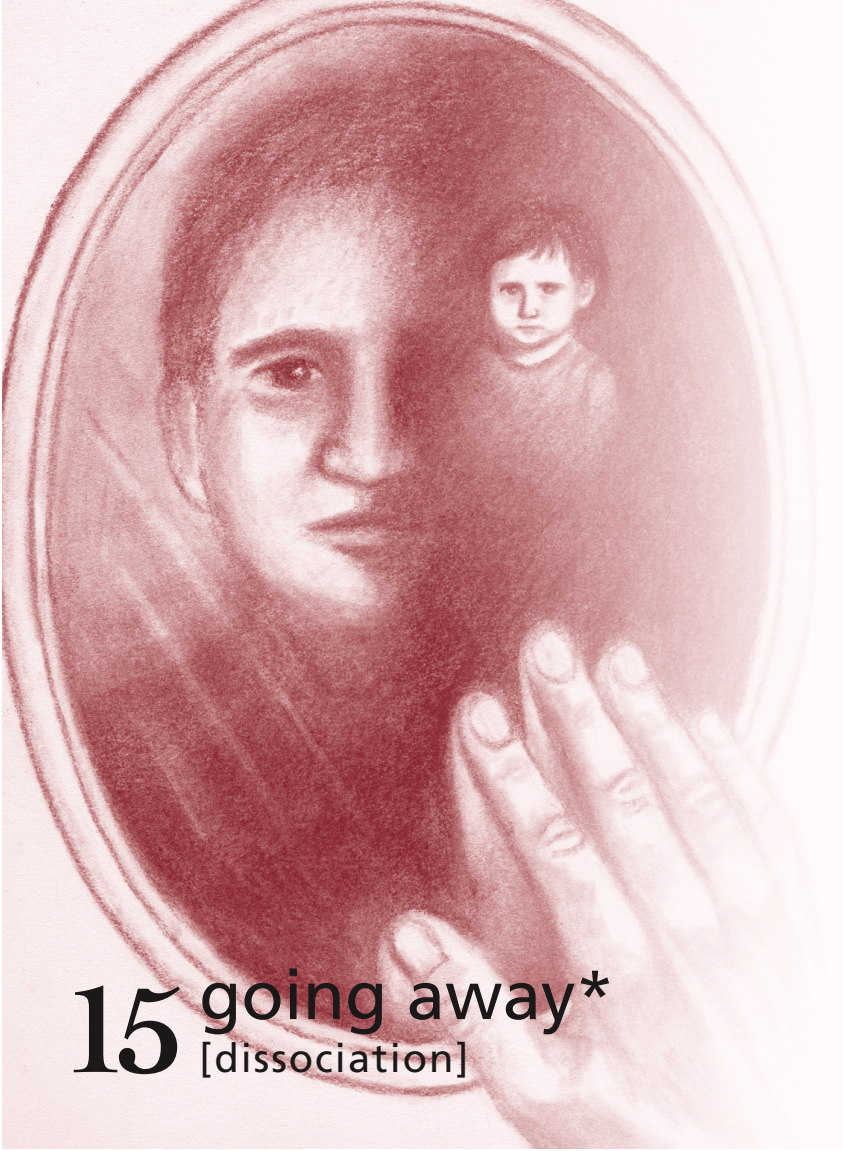
ok, forget about whether it's good or not good.
it just is.
and the way i be in charge is ...
i wiggle.
and when i do that,
it seems like i am the boss of my uncle.
and that is good.
or better than the alternative, anyway.

and it will be twenty years, at least,
when i am dancing naked in front of lots of men,
on a stage,
and doing secret things with them in cars, for money,
and *loving* the idea of controlling all of them,
that a quiet man will ask me...

"oh, my sweet dear.
how did you know of your power in the first place?
and how did you know you needed it?
and what do you think that power you had
protected you from?
what, sweet child, happened to you
before you ever wiggled on uncle's lap?"

i hate that quiet man.
i wonder if i could wiggle on his lap?
then he wouldn't ask me those things
that make me feel small
and helpless
and afraid.

(is there a safe lap anywhere,
for a slut like me?)



15 going away*

[dissociation]

please don't hurt me, the child in me said
a voice from my past telling me now what i said.
but the child had no choice but to leave

once again

the body remained but the memory's dim
resigned to the fact that the act was beginning
i left the boy there to endure all the sinning.
i must go away, i said to my self
away from the one who was doing the damage
away from the one who was taking advantage
caressing and stroking and rubbing and poking
talking so smoothly with love words you know.

something felt bad and i had to go.
and i did.

but to where?

where did i go?

how long was i gone?

was i gone until dawn?

did anyone know?

did i ever really, wholly return

or was part of me left disconnected and spurned?
was that part my body, my feelings or heart?
was it all and some more that took leave from the start?

whatever took place as i lay there, a child
dependent and helpless and numbly beguiled
has left horrid scars and memory loss
has stolen my self and left it in parts.

and now many, many... so many years since
the feeling's returning a bit here a bit there.
the memories churning of a little boy... bare
of penises stiffening, confusion and scare.
of a big one and little one being compared.
the feeling's returning a bit here a bit there.
the memories churning of a little boy... bare.
a flash unexpected that catches off guard
a flash with a feeling long since denied.
he tried to protest with his weak little voice
that something felt bad, that something was wrong
though he didn't know what and he didn't know why

he was told something special, he was told such a lie.
my tummy hurts and i feel kind've sick.
"it'll be fine; you'll feel better tomorrow"
"it'll be fine; let me get you a drink"
"then you lay back down and you go to sleep"
"you'll feel better tomorrow, not a sound nor a peep."

it was like constipation the pain that i felt
he had rubbed between my legs and my bottom with gel
like A and D ointment to help it feel well.
and i feel it today
that warm oil slick.
and i feel it today
and it makes me feel sick.
i see in a flash his large, hardened dick
through the fly of his pj's
rubbing my lip.

and i struggle and wonder
attempt to make sense.
i search and i long to recover my tim



the child who took leave of me so long ago
the child full of wonder and promise and, oh
will he come out from hiding?

will we see face to face?

will he let me embrace him in a place that is safe?

will we finally merge the small and the tall?

is it whim to think we can finally win?

and if we unite will we run and not hide

run just for fun

full of delight

will we laugh not just cry

when the blind regains sight?

and i struggle and wonder

attempt to make sense.

i search and i long to recover my Tim

to find and to nurture, to love and to care.

will he ever find comfort and learn how to trust?

will he ever recover the him that he lost?

will we ever be one?
the two paid the cost
i'm here
but i'm there
but sometimes nowhere.

and i grasp to find words to describe the deep pain.
i gasp and block feelings that make me insane
or sane they would make me if felt to the full.
i really am trying
i'm trying so hard.
the questions keep coming
the wondering too
about who i am
about who are you.
for i look in the mirror and i know not the man.

is the boy standing there
will i reach out my hand?

** Editor's Note: "Going Away" is the only poem in this collection not penned by Michael Trout. It is also the only poem clearly written by a grownup about his own experience as a very young child. It is included here because it suggests, more clearly than anything I have seen, the experience of dissociation from the inside—and, even more particularly, from the inside of a very young child. The author's identity cannot be revealed, in honor of his privacy. It was written during an intense period of psychotherapeutic work. After leaving it on the coffee table of his therapist, he returned the next week having no memory of having written it, or having left it there.*



16 multiple transitions

[foster care]

i want to talk with you about what it feels like
getting ready to be adopted,
when you are a little kid who has already had
about
a hundred mothers.

when you can barely remember
what your first mother
smelled like.

when everyone spoke a different language in the
place where you were born
than in the place you are now.

when some of the people who took care of you
were called
“foster parents”
and you didn’t know what that meant
except something about
they weren’t going to stick around.

when, in the process of being moved all over the place,
you lost some of your brothers
and your sisters
and a particular pair of shoes that felt just right
and your absolutely most favorite cuddly,
and a certain place on the inside of your last crib
where you used to scratch with your fingernail
to help yourself go to sleep.

kids like me, see, don't have families of our own.
because there's something wrong about us.
(i guess.)
or because there aren't enough to go around.
or something.
and i probably won't get one, either.
or if i do,
will it be too late for me to believe
that they love me,
and are going to stay with me?

so i want to talk to you
big people
about these things,
even though i'm not sure you are real interested.

are you the same big people
who keep doing these things to me in the first place?

(please don't get offended if i talk to all of you at once:
caseworkers
foster parents
judges
adoptive parents.
i just need to say how it all feels to me,
and sometimes i can't get the
cast of characters straight.)

some people say that my first parents shook me until my
eyeballs got loosened up,
or they left me alone,



or they gave me away,
or they just ran away.
i guess you think, because of that,
i am supposed to not miss them?
(because if i did it would sure make me lots
more cooperative
with all the plans you keep making for me.)

should i just say,
“they did the best they could”
so i am not so ticked off
and lonely
and worried all the time
about what the big people are going to do next?

the truth is,
i can't do any of these things:
i can't forget.
(even when my brain does, my body won't.)
i can't stop myself from yearning

(even though later I will get quite good at playing games about this).

i'm not saying i was some cherished treasure or anything, in my family.

but what were you thinking when you sent big men in uniforms to grab me out of my screaming father's arms at eleven o'clock at night, scaring me to death?

or when you sent me to a foster home without telling them about the special ways i needed to be handled because i had never stayed anywhere long enough to get attached to anybody?

or when you then took me from those people who were so disappointed in me after a few weeks

that they said i would have to be "disrupted" (whatever that means).

so you sent me to a family with an older foster child who was mean to little kids because they were weak and small. and so he punched me a lot in secret. and pulled real hard on my penis in the middle of the night.

and when that family got rid of me, and the next, and the next, did you think i was going to take it all lying down?

did you think i was supposed to just be sweet and adorable and ready to connect to yet another family

who were going to throw me away?
(could *you* have done that?)

after a while,
i had just lost too many people
that i might have cared about.

i had been with too many “parents”
who really weren’t,
because they couldn’t hold me tightly in their hearts at all.

none of you got how i was being changed
by all these losses,
(in my heart and in my behavior).

after a while,
i began to get some pretty bad ideas
about how things work.
and mostly those ideas said that i was,
by that time,
in deep doodoo.

i wasn’t going to let anybody like me.
not even me.

and so, now, i won’t let you imagine
even for a minute
that i like you.
that i need you,
desperately.
that i might ever grow to trust you.

i am not
after all
a complete moron.

are you ready to have me not believe you?
are you ready for me to fight you for control?
are you ready to hold me,
and then hold me some more
(when all the time i act like i don’t want you to
at all)?

are you ready to really stay with me,
through a battle that might last almost my whole
growing up?

are you willing to feel as powerless as i do?

what will you think when i say i don't care a bit
whether you go on vacation and leave me with aunt harriet,
who i hardly know at all?

then
when you come back,
are you ready to deal
with my taking a dump
in front of your bedroom door
every single day for three whole weeks?

you see, it is like this, big people:
i'm not stupid.
i was not blind.
i do pay attention
because it matters lots to me.

and so when my first parents knocked me around
or acted like i was invisible,
or gave me to someone else to raise,
or stood there screaming
while you took me away from them,
i noticed.

and when no one came to take their place,
i noticed that
too.

and when the orphanage didn't last,
and the first half-dozen foster families didn't last,
something started happening to me.

a little bit of my spirit started to die.

for some reason
then
i started pulling out my eyebrows.
(i'm not sure what that has to do with
my spirit dying.)



i agree that it doesn't make much sense
for me to join in
with all the other people
that have hurt me,
by hurting myself.
but i do it anyway.

so i bite on my hand,
or dig at my face,
or make a real bad sore on the top of my head
from scratching myself.

i pull out clumps of my hair,
and so the kids at preschool laugh,
and big people have an odd look on their faces
when they see me.

i masturbate a lot
to comfort myself.
(i even let a dog lick me down there.)
they say that sometimes i try
to touch other kids down there.

sometimes i run into the arms of strangers,
like i have known them forever,
and like i don't actually care anymore who i am safe
with or not.

(am i safe with anybody?
does it matter any more?)

did i mention how much i am growing to
hate smallness,
and weakness,
and defenselessness?

it's getting so the only thing i know how to do
is to be just as tough as i can,
and to try to rub out smallness and weakness
wherever i see them:
in the kittens that get hung by the clothesline
in the backyard
and squished with a tennis racquet.
in the babies in my recent foster homes
who turn up scratched.

in my own *self*
which i attack,
particularly when i am feeling small or scared,
and i need to beat myself into more toughness.

and as little parts of my spirit keep dying,
will it surprise you
that i'm not exactly going to be overjoyed
when you finally say you have permanent parents
for me?

do you honestly think i am going to say,
"oh, i get it.
you were just kidding all those other times,
but this time you really mean it"?

and, so, do you want to hear something funny?
just about the time i am ready to get what everybody
thought that i needed
(parents who are actually never going to leave me)
i'm going to get just a tad weird.

i'm going to start banging my head
more than i did before.

i might start acting like a baby again and,
even if i had gotten a little bit comfortable with my latest
“parents”

i'm going to go back to stiffening my body,
and screaming at night,
and doing everything i can to tell you
that i don't want you to love me.

i can't stand all this talk about
“permanence”
and
“adoption.”

i will make you sorry you ever thought about
trying to get close to me.
i will make you feel almost as helpless and small as i have
usually felt.
so are you wondering what i need?

are you wondering what i would do about all of this
if i had the power?

first of all, it would help a lot if you would start
with one simple, clear commandment to yourself:
never forget that i am watching.
never forget that every single thing you do matters
immensely to me,
(even when i work like crazy to make you think
that it does not).
and i will remember.

you may be able to get away with treating me as if i am
invisible for a while
(perhaps long enough to “disrupt” me
or move yourself to a different casework job).
but, in your heart of hearts, you know:
i was there, watching,
i was having deep feelings about what was happening
to me
and i needed someone to act as if it mattered, hugely.

second
don't imagine that i will ever stop yearning
for my birthfamily
(even though, as in other things,
i will pretend otherwise).
help me find some way to keep a connection with them,
even if i never see them again.
bring out pictures, or a life book
and hold me while i rage
or sob
or stare,
or all of these at once.

and understand that none of this is a reflection on you.
don't be surprised when i come back
from a visit with the
peeing my pants or throwing tantrums in the bath that
night.
i told you: things matter to me.
so i am going to have feelings about things that matter
to me.

third, it would help a lot
if you would make the decisions that you need to make
and stick with them.
some days i think my mind is going to explode
because i know something is going on in my life but i
can't tell what it is;
later i'll learn that there was a court hearing that day
and everybody in my life was wrought up
and then it was "continued"
(whatever that means —
except mostly that nothing is getting decided,
and i still don't have a family).

i don't get to make the decisions.
you do.
so have the courage to make them.
so that i can get a life.

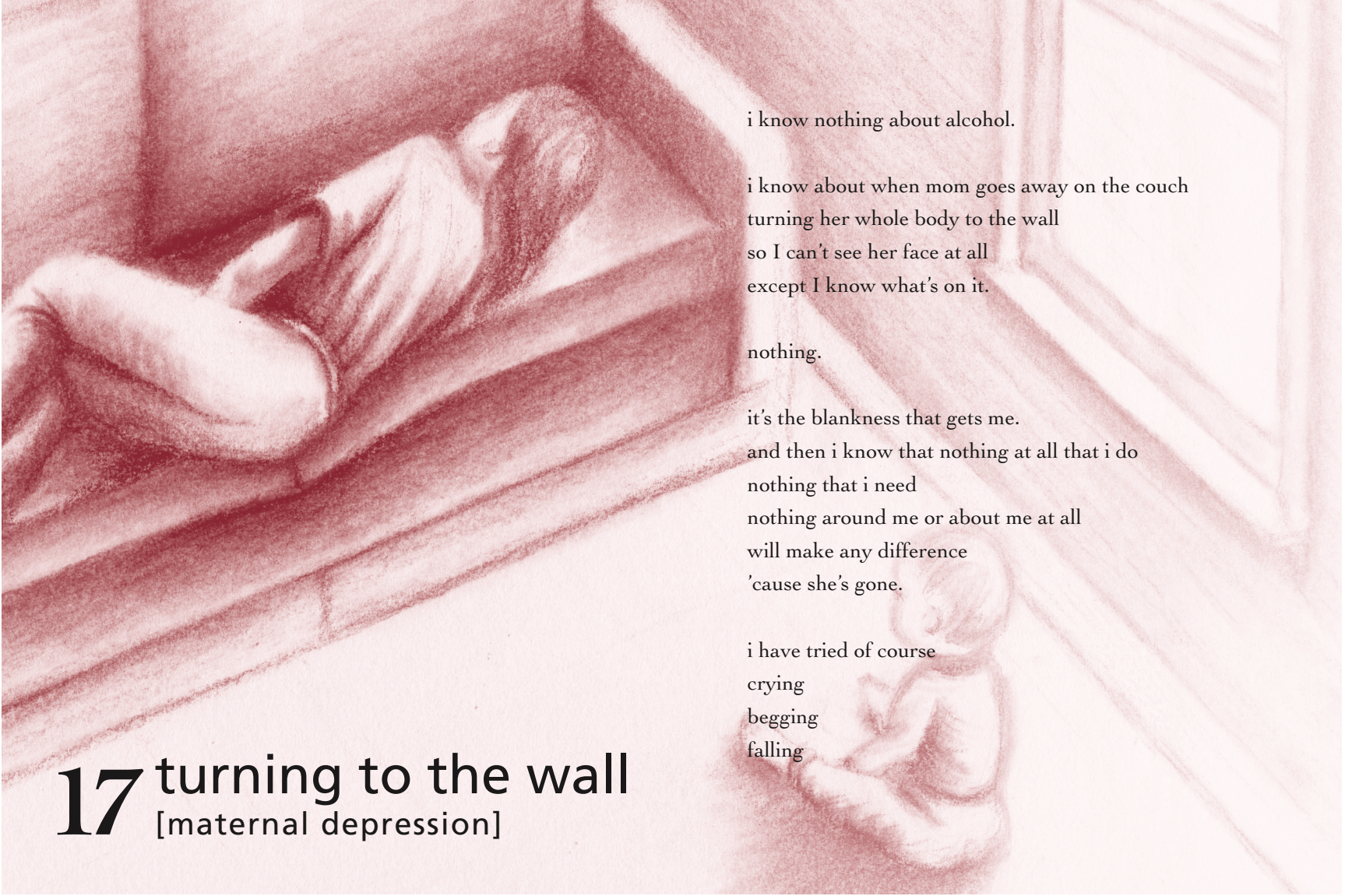
fourth
it would mean a lot to me
if you would take good care of my foster family.

they have their hands full.
sometimes they don't know what to do with me.
so make sure someone is there
to answer their questions,
to encourage them,
to help them understand me better.
you won't like what will happen if i keep
getting disrupted,
and the only way i can think of to prevent that
is to take extra good care of the people
that are taking care of me.

so have i told you anything that you wanted to know?
have i helped you to understand
how we feel—
all of us kids who fell into the world of foster care and
adoption?
i know it is a burden for you
to think so carefully about me,
and i know you might get a little nervous

to realize that i am watching,
and affected by all that you do.
but you won't be sorry if you take me seriously.
someday, see, i will be big people.

give that a thought.



i know nothing about alcohol.

i know about when mom goes away on the couch
turning her whole body to the wall
so I can't see her face at all
except I know what's on it.

nothing.

it's the blankness that gets me.
and then i know that nothing at all that i do
nothing that i need
nothing around me or about me at all
will make any difference
'cause she's gone.

i have tried of course
crying
begging
falling

17 turning to the wall

[maternal depression]

getting into trouble
doing bad things
doing good things
doing no thing
it all comes out the same
she's still gone.

you probably think i should get wise and just go play
or something
and i do sometimes
but mostly i cannot stop myself from trying
just one more thing
that might be the magic wand
that would wake her up
and she would roll over and say
"oh, dear heart
there you are!
i've been missing you so much"

and then my mom would be altogether back
and i would have brought her there
and from that time forward
there would be no more staring at the wall
because i would always know exactly what to do.

it could happen



18 becoming two
[individuation]

once we were one
(my mom and i).
everything we did was together.
we shared breath
and brats (when she ate, i ate)
and time.

when she moved,
i moved.

when she watched the fireworks,
i jumped.

when i couldn't sleep,
guess what?

and on the day they cut us apart,
i'm pretty sure we both cried.

but then i saw her
and she saw me
and boy
talk about fireworks!

she held me almost as close as i had been to her
when i was on the other side of her skin.
and i slurped and nuzzled and tucked in
and we had us a *team*.

every day she told me in 112 different ways
that she would pulverize anyone
who even thought about hurting me.
she was out of her mind
over me.

i learned to want her in new ways every day
(and i might have made her a little nuts
as i tried them all out).

when my brain was able to picture her
even when she wasn't there,
i taught my body to follow her everywhere
and find her
and rejoiced every time i succeeded.

soon i was so sure of her
that i became sure of me.
i crawled away from her, as well as toward.
i entertained strangers, and wasn't even a little afraid.
one day my mom found me in the shoe store at the mall
where i had wandered to slide on the stool
and talk to a huge man with skin like chocolate grahams.

my mom was very excited and sorta' mad
but not really
just worried
because she forgot that
because of *her*
i had learned to feel safe



and protected
and confident
and strong
and determined
and full of energy to see everything and touch everything
in the whole world
all at once.

and so now i am two.
and my body is about to explode.

i want to run into my mom's arms one minute
and *out there* the next.
(do i look funny running back and forth?)

when i fell off dad's recliner this morning
i felt like a little baby.
i wanted only one person
(you know who)
and i burrowed in and bawled

like my leg was surely going to fall right off
instead of just have a little scratch on it.

only then

suddenly

i did not want to be there at all
and i wanted my mom to stop slobbering all over me
and let me go
so i can go back to not needing her in the least
(thank you very much)
and proving that i am big
and can take care of me.

so you can probably see that there is a problem.
i want both of those ways to be,
not just one.
and you seem to want me to make up my mind.
i'm pretty sure you like the
"big-kid-who-doesn't-cry-and-fuss-all-the-bloody-time-
and-thank-god-almighty-for-that!" version of me.

(only sometimes you also act like you could really get into
that cuddling thing again,
so i'm not too sure of your vote.)

anyway, here's the deal:
you helped me get here
to this crossroads —
that really *isn't* a crossroads
because I'm not ready to choose yet —
by loving me so well.
so don't stop.

can you let *me* call the signals for a while
without going crazy,
or thinking that i am?
or
worse
thinking that i'm just spoiled
or a tyrant
who needs to be shown who's boss?

it's your *fault* that i want so badly to be big
and actually think i can do it.

but *wow* am i giving up a lot of good stuff if i do.

if you believe that you did a good job
and you believe that i am trying to,
i'm pretty sure we can get through this.

and then i won't be either too big or too little,
when i run into everything that is *out there*
for about the next hundred years.

Subject Index

Adaptation	46, 53	Custody evaluation	52–53
Adoption	30, 40, 74	Depression	86
Aggression	75, 77, 79	Dissociation	65, 70–73
Alcoholism	46, 86	Divorce	52–61
Alertness	17, 48	Domestic violence	8, 46
Anger	3, 7, 41	Experience (learning from)	3, 4, 7
Anger at weak things	81	Family (adoptive)	33, 35
Being "owned"	33, 60	Family (fantasies of)	81
Being "special"	30	Family (finding one)	81
Being bad	24–25, 40, 61, 68	Family (foster)	64, 74–84
Being grown up	53–91	Family (having an imaginary one)	59
Being in control	10, 46, 55	Family (keeping one)	57
Being tough	12, 81, 91	Family (losing one)	58, 60
Birth	24, 37	Family (making one up)	13
Birth parent	32, 64	Family (my first)	32, 35, 41, 64, 75, 83
Blighted twin	18	Family (resisting having one)	81–82
Choices	52	Fantasies	59, 87
Circumcision	26–28,	Fear	7, 63, 68
Confidence	89, 92	Feeling connected	18, 44
Control	5, 11, 78, 61	Fixing things	16, 25, 41, 46, 55

Forgetting	15, 34, 41, 76	Masturbation	80
Foster Care	65, 74–84	Maternal anxiety	3, 10, 16
Gender difference	44	Maternal depression	86
Ghosts	63	Medical procedures	26–28
Giving me away	32, 35, 40–41	Memory	74
Helplessness	5, 8, 28, 56, 82, 86	My body	2, 18, 26, 68
Hurting myself	79–82	My story	7, 45, 69
Hyperactivity	12, 15	Newborn adoption	30
Hypervigilance	5, 13, 48	Object permanence	89
Independence	46, 89, 91	Pain	27, 73
Individuation	15, 88–92	Parents who fight	3, 37, 61
Internal working model	4, 7, 11, 19, 25, 28, 45, 68–69, 84	Parental alcoholism	46, 86
Intrauterine life	2, 88	Parental divorce	52–61
Invisibility	54, 82	Paying attention	41
Loss of Self	17, 20, 31, 72	Permanence	81–82
Loss of siblings	75	Placement disruption	77, 82
Loss of my first parents	35, 40, 76	Placental barrier	2
Loss of my foster parents	74	Power (needing some)	12, 55
Love	89	Power (pretending I have it)	65, 68–69
Loyalties	35–36, 60	Prenatal awareness	2–7, 8–9
Lying	12	Prenatal life	2–7, 88
		Pretending	66

Rapprochement	90	Stealing	38
Regression	57, 60, 83	Strangers	81
Rejection	66	Survival	4, 5, 8, 10,
Relinquishment	40–41	Survival of one twin	18
Repeating early patterns	8, 69, 78	Transitions	30–38, 52–61, 7 4–84, 88–92
Rituals	34	Trauma	69, 77
Role reversal	12, 36, 59	Trust	14, 72
Running away	58, 90	Twins	18
Sadness	15	Vanishing twin	18
Safety	14	Voice of the infant	33
Self confidence	5, 51, 89	Wishing I did not exist	17
Sexual abuse	68, 70–73, 80	Withdrawal	5, 17, 70, 78
Sexual identity	45	Yearning	76, 83
Shame	24	Yelling	3, 8, 41, 46, 53
Social referencing	50		

Also by Michael Trout

BOOKS

(available in paperback or audiobook)

The Jonathon Letters: One Family's Use of Support as They Took in, and Fell in Love With, a Troubled Child
(2005, co-authored with Lori Thomas).

Available from
The Infant-Parent Institute, Inc.,
328 North Neil Street
Champaign, Illinois 61820 USA
telephone: 217-352-4060
website: www.infant-parent.com

FILMS

(available in VHS or DVD)

"BREAKING PEACES: Babies Have Their Say About Domestic Violence" (2002)

"Family Transitions: Young Children Speak Their Minds About Divorce" (1999)

"Gentle Transitions: A Newborn Baby's Point of View About Adoption" (1997)

"IS ANYONE IN THERE? Adopting a Wounded Child" (2004)

"Multiple Transitions: A Young Child's Point of View on Foster Care and Adoption" (1997)

Also available are a number of other films on attachment, infant mental health assessment, pregnancy, the birth of a child with a disability, and a psychotherapeutic model of infant mental health intervention.

BABY VERSES

The Narrative Poetry of Infants and Toddlers

"This is intensely compelling poetry that will stimulate your mind and touch your heart. A 'must read' for every man and woman who contemplates having a child."

...Thomas R. Verny, MD, DPsych; Author of The Secret Life of the Unborn Child; Founding President, Association for Pre and Perinatal Psychology and Health.

"Baby Verses: The Narrative Poetry of Infants and Toddlers invites the reader to listen, to think deeply and to respond with new awareness of the infant without and the infant within. How utterly remarkable..."

...Deborah J. Weatherston, PhD, co-editor of Case Studies in Infant Mental Health; Zero to Three Fellow; Executive Director, Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health.

The Infant-Parent Institute, Inc.
328 North Neil Street
Champaign, Illinois 61820

U.S. \$22.95

