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Good Enough, Bad Enough, Animal, Monster: Mothers in Alice Munro's *The Love of a Good Woman*

CHANTEL LAVOIE

IN "MY MOTHER'S DREAM," THE FINAL STORY in Alice Munro's book *The Love of a Good Woman*, the adult narrator recalls her fraught relationship with her mother, Jill, when the narrator was a squalling infant: "We were monsters to each other. Jill and I" (373). Yet after a harrowing time for both of these monsters — the young widow and her screaming baby — they survive one another. They even love one another. And the monstrosity is forgiven. The story argues that mothers especially — in their particular intimate experience of the monstrosity of birth and how it introduces death into the world — cannot help embodying that monstrosity, nor should they be condemned for trying to escape it.

This essay considers the dark ambivalence of the monstrous mother and Munro's defence of it in her 1998 collection. In these eight stories — set from the 1940s through the 1970s — we encounter sickly mothers, stepmothers, mothers who abandon their children by leaving their husbands, and aunts who try to wrest a mother's duties. We have seen such women before and since in Munro's work.¹ Magdalene Redekop's helpful *Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro* (1992) focuses on the subversive "play and parody" of the "mock mother," a type that includes numerous surrogates: "stepmothers, foster mothers, adoptive mothers, child mothers, nurses, old maids mothering their parents, lovers mothering each other, husbands mothering wives, wives mothering husbands, sisters mothering each other, and numerous women and men behaving in ways that could be described as maternal" (4).² Pushing in all these directions and subverting traditional icons of motherhood, Munro creates instead what Redekop identifies as clowns: "Dancing in front of the erasure, the conspicuous mock-maternal figures do not affirm something inexpressible or sacred" (8). *The Love of a Good Woman* postdates Redekop's excellent work.³ Whereas the stories here

continue the mockery and parody that Redekop identifies as so fruitfully subversive in “breaking [old patterns of maternal representation] from within” (7), I argue that maternal characters in this, Munro’s ninth collection, more self-consciously revisit the *monstrous* mother who stalks so much literature. The result is not only an undermining of the good/bad binary traditionally imposed on women but also a replacement of the bad mother with a more complicated spectrum. Her mothers range from a Donald Winnicottian “good-enough” mother to a bad mother as well as from animal to monster.⁴

The difference between these last two — which can merge into one another — is ultimately measured, I argue, according to what is forgivable and what is unforgivable, with a messy breadth of possibilities in between. For instance, in Munro’s “The Children Stay,” a story that echoes Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, the sympathetic narrative voice sums up the loss that the protagonist’s two daughters endure after their mother leaves the family to be with another man: “Her children have grown up. They don’t hate her. For going away or staying away. They don’t forgive her, either. Perhaps they wouldn’t have forgiven her anyway, but it would have been for something different” (247). These comments are less an unsteady absolutism than a denial that absolutism can ever be granted, regardless of what might be said. They also leave the reader wondering: don’t they hate her a little? Just how bad does a mother have to be before she moves beyond forgiveness into the unforgivable?

Munro suggests that staying and coping with motherhood is only an uneasy compromise, not a triumph. Her fiction has always explored such ambivalence. It is an ambivalence that invites reading alongside the important work done in the 1950s (when much of her fiction is set) by the aforementioned British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott. His well-known proposal to replace the impossibly unrealistic “good mother” with the good-enough mother has been interpreted for over half a century as largely reassuring. After all, Winnicott emphasized, mothers become exhausted and overwhelmed. The good-enough mother is the “ordinary devoted mother” who “starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant’s needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant’s growing ability to deal with her failure. Her failure to adapt to every need of the child helps them adapt to external realities” (“Transitional Objects” 14). More importantly, having lost so much of her former life by taking

on her new role (and identity), the good-enough mother is ambivalent about that role. It is all right, it is “ordinary,” Winnicott argues, “that the mother hates the baby before the baby hates the mother, and before the baby can know the mother hates him” (*Child* 200). Literary critic Martha Nussbaum praises Winnicott’s emphasis on “the highly particular transactions that constitute love between two imperfect people” (282). The mother-child relationships in Munro’s work certainly enact such transactions, such imperfect love.

But are her mothers even good enough? Sometimes the answer is “just barely.” Sometimes, simply, it is “no.” And the main reason for their inadequate love for their children is sexual love for men who are not those children’s fathers. Many of Munro’s maternal characters ache with longing for men they love, and sex with those men takes them away from their children, the fruits of earlier relationships. These women compromise their children’s happiness, security, and on occasion safety to pursue romantic love, mustering great energy in flights toward such love and away from its absence in their marriages. They look and feel foolish as they journey toward romance — by bus, train, or plane, either leaving a child behind in another’s care or often with a child in tow. Ruth Scurr argues that at the heart of all of Munro’s fiction is “a bold acknowledgement of the animal irrationality of sexual desire” (34). The Aristotelian definition of “man” (in which “woman” shares) is a rational animal; in Munro’s fiction, the woman’s body wanting sex, having sex, and suffering the effects of sex is both animal and — at times when the animal overpowers the rational — monstrous.

Certainly, Munro’s mothers in *The Love of a Good Woman* are torn and shaky with longing, nearly out of their minds. And, as a result, damage is done. When Pauline later leaves her family for her lover in “The Children Stay,” it is her husband who says: “The children stay.” Hearing this causes her

acute pain. It will become chronic. Chronic means that it will be permanent but perhaps not constant. It may also mean that you won’t die of it. You won’t get free of it, but you won’t die of it. You won’t feel it every minute, but you won’t spend many days without it. . . . Say to yourself, You lose them anyway. They grow up. For a mother there’s always waiting this private slightly ridiculous desolation. They’ll forget this time, in one way or another they’ll disown you. . . . And still, what pain. (246-47)

There are two ways of reading “They’ll forget this time”: they’ll forget this period of time, and/or they’ll forget this (one) instance, this time. So this is motherhood. “The love of a good woman” might not be good itself, but it is love. With all that, Munro makes it clear that suffering does not necessarily prove goodness. Suffering only proves love, and neither love nor suffering — whether experienced for a child or for a man — in itself is particularly virtuous.

Furthermore, as often as maternal love is compromised for the sake of love for a man, maternal love itself is also something much like lust here. There are several moments throughout the collection in which the two loves are conflated. In “The Children Stay,” for example, when Pauline, who will eventually leave her family for another man, “started quoting [him, she] felt a giving-way in her womb or the bottom of her stomach, a shock that had travelled boldly upwards and out her vocal chords” (228). These comments reflect an animalistic, bodily response common in these stories, thereby speaking to the universality of such an intense visceral experience. This does not somehow make it less awful, though there is a kind of bleak comfort in how such feelings are normalized in the stories.

It is important that Munro’s protagonist-mothers are thoughtful, well read, and intelligent. Although sometimes they encounter alcoholics, drug addicts, and others plagued with different sorts of poverty (e.g., financial, educational), the central characters who scrape by at motherhood are not stupid, financially desperate, or unusually greedy, jealous, or spiteful. With all their white, middle-class advantages, they are merely in the throes of passion.

The long title story, “The Love of a Good Woman,” which makes up a quarter of the book, introduces a bitter, horrible woman on her deathbed. Mrs. Quinn, apparently without love for either her husband or her children, and therefore not “good” in anybody’s books (nor is her sick body), confesses to having helped her husband cover up the murder of her lover (or abuser), ophthalmologist Mr. Willens.⁵ Physically and psychologically, Mrs. Quinn is monstrous. She admits the crime on the last day of her life. The admission might be many things, however (a hallucination, boast, lie to destroy her husband, or challenge), and is made only to Enid, a practical nurse who looks after Mrs. Quinn and her two daughters. Enid, presumably, is the good woman who chooses to marry the farmer once he is widowed rather than expose his crime.

Her competence and genuine affection for the dying woman's children position her, too, as a good-enough substitute mother, but that is evidently second to the role of wife that she wants: "This is all messy, like Enid's 'ugly dreams' on the couch in the dying woman's room: In the dreams that came to her now she would be copulating or trying to copulate (sometimes she was prevented by intruders or shifts of circumstances) with utterly forbidden and unthinkable partners. With fat squirmy babies or patients in bandages or her own mother" (57). Of course, the dreams prove that what is "utterly forbidden" is not "unthinkable" at all. Julia Kristeva's insights on abjection are revealed anew in Enid's troubled dreams. Kristeva explains abjection in terms of thinking the unthinkable too: "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark, re-volts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant inside or outside ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, or the thinkable. . . . Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects" (*Powers* 1). Enid's dreams in the title story rehearse such abjection with monstrous reminders of sex, birth, and death. Getting into or getting out of another person is sickening. Instead of examining too closely "the mind's garbage" (57), Enid decides to make things right by taking the dead woman's place as wife and mother. She will tidy up the house and the lives of the widower and his children until "all order was as she had decreed" (88).

In Munro's work, even the love of a good woman takes on gothic, monstrous possibilities: Enid contemplates being drowned when she confronts the killer with his crime. Given the circumstances, she would die for love.⁶ Indeed, the very title of the collection carries implications of saving or making a man. It bridges romance and domesticity and seems to be a phrase anathematic to feminism. It does not call to mind, at least immediately, maternal love. Yet the irony of Munro's use of the expression "the love of a good woman" undermines the possibility of any human "saving" or "making" another. Even a mother, who has "made" another person in the most fundamental way, cannot build a child's character, though she can certainly mould it. Even a mother's love, according to Munro, is insufficient, selfish, and suspect. A mother must be trusted because she is what she is but not without reservation. Even the love of a good mother is not unconditional and might not be good enough.

One story that highlights this warning is titled "Rich as Stink." Here the mother is distracted and humiliated by love for a married man. Her

daughter, Karen, is the central character who spends most of the year with her father in Vancouver, and this scenario suggests inadequacy in motherhood. Karen nearly dies because of the unhealthy love triangle and tension over money that result from her mother's choices: the girl is severely burned while playing dress-up in the old wedding gown of her mother's lover's wife. That this act, intended to make everyone friends again, leads to searing pain, skin grafts, and months in hospital seems to be both a direct and an indirect warning about slipping into expectations of romantic conventions, as Karen did the wedding gown. It does resolve the adults' *ménage à trois* but at the price of a child's health and, we can assume, her own future romantic prospects. The child is literally scarred by a woman's love. Although this accident apparently brings Karen's mother back to her senses, she has not been good enough. Yet after dissolution of the *ménage à trois*, she is the only mother Karen has left.

Forgiving Monsters

The monster is that uncertain cultural body in which is condensed an intriguing simultaneity or doubleness. . . . [I]t introjects the disturbing, repressed, but formative traumas of "pre-" into the sensory moment of "post-," binding the one irrevocably to the other. The monster commands, "Remember me": restore my fragmented body, piece me back together, allow the past its eternal return. (Cohen ix)

Becoming a mother involves doubling not simply of the self but also of the self with the other. We tend to think of the monsters that we have invented as being animals with near-human intelligence. But clearly not every animal is a monster. Originally, we should remember, the word *monster* referred to a mythical creature that was part animal and part human, frequently of great size and ferocious appearance. Later, more generally, it became any imaginary creature that was large, ugly, and frightening. In her recent work *Monstrous Bodies: Feminine Power in Young Adult Horror Fiction*, June Pulliam argues that "Monsters are a girl's best friend, and they have a lot to teach us" (178). One lesson is that, "in a patriarchal culture, they *are* the Other, even when they successfully contort themselves into a restrictive normative femininity" (3). Arguably, the body of the mother-to-be contorts itself, restricts itself, becoming both normative and monstrous at once.

Among the proposals that Jeffrey Jerome Cohen posits in his com-

elling study on monsters are “The Monster’s Body Is a Cultural Body” (4), “The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis” (6), and “The Monster Stands at the Threshold . . . of Becoming” (21). Each argument can apply to the pregnant body as well. Cohen sees a cultural insistence on the “extreme version of marginalization” and “deviance construction” that labelling someone a monster enacts as “a code or a pattern or a presence or an absence that unsettles what has been constructed to be received as natural, as human” (ix). Munro above all unsettles whatever we believe to be “natural” about the figure of the mother, conflating animal and monster in her mother characters, even as she questions what is natural and what is unnatural.

Perhaps the key difference in our thinking is that we “forgive” animals the damage that they do because it is in the *nature* of their species, whereas monsters are “unnatural.” In stories about mothers, Munro returns continuously to patterns of forgiveness granted to and forgiveness withheld from mothers when they are not good enough. The story “Save the Reaper” in *The Love of a Good Woman* is about a mother named Eve, also now a grandmother, and she does not seem to be adequate in either role. Her daughter, Sophie, was conceived during a three-day train trip between Vancouver and Toronto with a man from Kerala, in the southern part of India. Eve and this man, who had a wife and baby daughter in India, could not find condoms near the Calgary train station, and so Sophie was conceived. The action of the story in the present entails Eve taking her grandson and granddaughter on a car ride near a cottage that she has rented for the month. The three end up going into a house where strange men sit in various states of undress at a table, playing cards. There is the smell of semen in the room (196). When Eve and the children finally get back into their car — which for a few minutes it seems as though they might not be allowed to do — a drunk teenage girl who might have been a sex slave at the house jumps into the car with them. All of this — beginning with Eve allowing her grandson, Philip, to dictate the rules of a car-following game on the road, based on the notion that some drivers are “aliens” — speaks to her mismanagement of things, a recklessness at the edges of her character.

In the middle of the story, Eve remembers her own feeling as a child about her mother, who often embarrassed her and whom she often despised. There is no indication that *her* mother was anything but conventional:

“What did you hate most about your mother?” was a game that Eve would play with her friends in her first years free of home.

“Corsets,” one girl would say, and another would say, “Wet aprons.”

Hair nets. Fat arms. Bible quotations. “Danny Boy.”

Eve always said “Her corns.”

She had forgotten all about this game until recently. The thought of it now was like touching a bad tooth. (187)

These critiques are visceral, creepy, and constrictive — pointing to everything that the girls (who are “free of” rather than “away from” home) do not want to be. Their targets are also conventional in their stifling nature — corsets, aprons, the Bible — which contrasts with how Eve has lived and how she has seen herself, as with her choice to send her daughter to an “ungraded alternative school” about which her daughter speaks “almost viciously” as an adult (177). Again, whatever kind of mother she is, a woman is condemned by the role as well as by the children who make her a mother. Eve recalls that mocking her own mother is now “like touching a bad tooth” because guilt is in the body as much as in the mind. The analogy reflects Eve herself aging while recalling her judgmental younger self, since our teeth pain us most when we are babies and again in old age. Redekop argues about earlier work by Munro that “the first step to take to avoid the trap of turning the maternal body into an object, is to see that the mother is in the act of looking at herself, even when she is also looking after her children” (4). “Save the Reaper” does much the same thing but with the (grand) mother remembering looking at her own mother in this way and at the same time looking at her selves — past and present. The aching tooth is not merely a synecdoche for all sorts of bodily weaknesses but also a hard and soft piece of dying life. In a sense, the title of the story and the name of its protagonist tell us everything that we need to know. The story of the first mother is about a fatal lack of judgment. What Kristeva terms “Motherhood’s impossible syllogism” is a monstrous legacy (*Desire* 237).

Winnicott argues that ultimately the not-good-enough mother’s failure to “meet the infant’s gesture” provides neither the necessary illusion nor the disillusion for the child to develop a “true self.” As a result, a “false” or “caretaker” self comes to stand between the child and reality (“Playing” 72-73). Perhaps Munro’s mother characters themselves are

more like uncared-for children, acting out alternative realities, escaping from current realities. One thing that the *children* whom Munro writes about are capable of is recognizing their own wounds. Karen, the burned girl in “Rich as Stink,” mostly recovers, and “Everybody thought she was just the same except for her skin. Nobody knew that she had changed. . . . Nobody knew the sober, victorious feeling she had sometimes, when she knew how much she was on her own” (294). She has grown a thicker skin not only literally because of the burns but also emotionally in response to her mother’s failure to love *her* the most. Karen has evidently developed a “caretaker self,” but Munro does not allow for a simple reading of this or any other self as “false.” It might indeed be more true than any other self, more authentic than the myth of the entirely selfless mother.

In a frequently quoted interview that Munro gave to the *Paris Review* in 1994, she recalled writing when her children were young:

Some part of me was absent for those children, and children detect things like that. Not that I neglected them, but I wasn’t wholly absorbed. When my oldest daughter was about two, she’d come to where I was sitting at the typewriter, and I would bat her away with one hand and type with the other. I’ve told her that. This was bad because it made her the adversary to what was most important to me.⁷

The wording of this confession is striking. The self-as-mother was “absent for those children.” The preposition “for” implies detection by the children in addition to divided attention, but I nevertheless want to suggest that there is, throughout Munro’s work over the decades, something significant about being not (or not merely) absent *from* one’s children but absent *for* them. *The Love of a Good Woman* both refuses to apologize for mothers’ failures and refuses to pretend that mothers are not failures. Many of these mother characters’ decisions and actions seem to prove on one level what Winnicott identified as the “ordinary” weakness and ambivalence of the good-enough mother. Batting a child away is not serious; however, Munro wants to show even here in her reminiscences that the barrier between “good enough” and “not good enough” is, again, thinner than what Winnicott proposed.

In Munro’s final story in *The Love of a Good Woman* — “My Mother’s Dream,” with which I began this essay — the first-person

narrator recounts what she cannot recall: her own infancy, when Jill, the monstrous mother (exhausted and at wit's end) attends her monstrous baby (uncomfortable, screaming, and also exhausted). Recall that "We were monsters to each other. Jill and I" (373). The adult narrator's use of her mother's first name throughout the story is significant. Also important is that the narrator herself is never named; it both is and is not her story: the lacuna where her name should be makes room for her mother to be the protagonist. There is no father in the picture — he died in the Second World War, leaving his young wife pregnant. The baby, born just after her father's funeral, will not settle for her mother, will not nurse, will not let her sleep. Others — one spinster aunt especially — take charge, and Jill does not have the strength to withstand this turn of events. In a household of females, mother and daughter have no bond.⁸

On several levels, this story responds directly to Winnicott's work, troubling the character of the woman who wants and desperately tries to be good enough but is rejected by her child. What results from the lack of bonding is a reversal of Winnicott's formula because of the baby herself.⁹ In "My Mother's Dream," in which another woman has undertaken the adaptation that Winnicott associates with the good-enough mother's love, the climax of the story hinges on the baby who will not stop crying while all others are away (including this adaptive and adapted aunt). So, after a number of hours, the exhausted mother grinds and sprinkles some painkillers into the child's milk. It is medicine that she takes for a day-long headache of her own. "Logically," we are told, the bottle of pills that Jill goes to find in her sister-in-law's room is "on top of a pile of sanitary pads" (379). Whereas the logic results from the fact that the sister-in-law "Aisla takes something strong for her menstrual cramps," the contrast here is evident between the woman whose body has produced a child whom she tries to silence with painkillers and the female body that bleeds every month without producing offspring and thereby causes another kind of pain.

While the baby sleeps both a heat-exhausted and drug-induced sleep, her mother dreams that she has forgotten the child outside. Upon returning to the house, the others (hysterically) think that the baby in its deep sleep is dead, but this is not so, and when Jill holds her "I don't stiffen or kick or arch my back. I am still pretty sleepy from the sedative in my milk which knocked me out for the night and half a day and which, in a larger quantity — maybe not so much larger, at

that — would have really finished me off” (387). A bond is finally created between mother and child at this dramatic moment. In typical Munroian fashion, we learn here that “the alternative to loving was disaster” (392). We are forced to think about that alternative and how harshly the mother should or should not have been judged had that “not so much larger” quantity been in the milk.

Had the baby died, the cause of death would not have been anything “evil” or “wicked,” but it would not entirely have been an accident either. It would have tipped Jill, however, into the category of not good enough. In *Winnicott’s Children: Independent Psychoanalytical Approaches with Children and Adolescents*, Ann Horne and Monica Lanyado explain that “parents’ inexperience of dealing with primitive feelings and the incessant demands of infants . . . can put the baby at risk. Indeed . . . children most at risk of physical harm and death are infants under one” (82-83). The use of the term “primitive feelings” is intriguing, given that Winnicott’s openness to “hatred” has led to the discussion here. Do animals feel hatred? Or only humans and monsters? Worth noting too in the context of “My Mother’s Dream” is that, in the stories that we write, we are more likely to tranquilize an animal but kill a monster.

Jill ends her baby’s crying not only by administering a sedative but also by ignoring the cries, picking up her violin, and playing for herself.¹⁰ It might be said here that the mother is absent for the child. This all adds up to more than a complaint that mothers are damned either way, and it is more complicated than Winnicott’s freeing and forgivably good-enough mother. It is a category that Munro suggests apart from good, good enough, and bad: the bad-enough mother. Jill nearly kills her baby and could easily have tipped over the edge from being good enough to being bad enough with a little more painkilling dust.

Synecdoche: The Breast, the Beast

The object which is being mourned is the mother’s breast and all that the breast and milk have come to stand for in the infant’s mind: namely, love, goodness and security. All these are felt by the baby to be lost, and lost as a result of his uncontrollable greedy and destructive phantasies and impulses against his mother’s breasts. (Klein 148)

Being privy to Jill’s drugging of her infant’s milk in “My Mother’s Dream” aligns the reader with the child in judging or forgiving mater-

nal carelessness and selfishness throughout *The Love of a Good Woman*. And so, in this final and happily ending story, the reader who might be judgmental one minute of the mother who reads “the instructions for making baby formula [that] were printed on the side of the corn syrup tin” (390) must contend the next minute with that mother, now nursing her second child and waiting for its next feeding, “drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes at the kitchen table” (394). The narrator, long ago that corn syrup baby, recalls that “My mother fed this [second] baby from her breast — I was glad to hear that no such intimate body-heated meals had been served to me” (394). There is no winning, it seems, in how infants are fed; therefore, there is no losing. After all, the speaker’s mother — Jill — is a good-enough mother, which puts into perspective both the corn syrup formula and the coffee-and-smoke-flavoured breast milk. Redekop points out that “Milk is an inherently absurd image to many of the people in Munro’s stories” and that, in repeatedly constructing this response in her fiction, Munro identifies the paradox “that the same society that etherealizes motherhood places a very low economic value on the act of nurturing” (6). Part of the initial rejection of Jill in “My Mother’s Dream,” the narrator recounts, is that “I refused to take my mother’s breast. I screamed blue murder. The big stiff breast might just as well have been a snouted beast rummaging in my face” (365). The words *snouted beast* take us beyond the animal function of breastfeeding, encompassing something both inverted (the breast threatens to consume the child) and monstrous. Such passages also thereby resist Winnicott’s writing on the mother’s breast and the infant’s illusion, with the former as a transitional object: “The mother, at the beginning, by an almost 100 per cent adaptation affords the infant the opportunity for the illusion that her breast is part of the infant. It is, as it were, under the baby’s magical control” (“Transitional Objects” 15). Munro writes against this magical control of the breast and the milk that it (sometimes) produces. Of Kath in “Jakarta” we are told that “When she nurses her baby she often reads a book, sometimes smokes a cigarette, so as not to sink into a sludge of animal function. And she’s nursing so that she can shrink her uterus and flatten her stomach, not just provide the baby . . . with precious maternal antibodies” (91).

Instead, the book as a whole refuses to let that part of a woman’s body be part of her love: for instance, “nursing,” often used in the long title story, refers to the practical home nurse, Enid, who might never

nurse in the other sense. The above-mentioned phrase “sludge of animal function” comes soon after the end of “The Love of a Good Woman,” in which the farmer-widower explains to Enid that “there’s things cows won’t eat” (88). Here she has already decided to ignore the “rubbishy drama” of her dreams (58). Yet she is not free of her own mind. When she hears the lowing of the cows, “munching and jostling, feeding at night,” Enid moves from thinking what lovely lives they have to “It ends, of course, in the slaughterhouse. The end is disaster. For everybody . . . the same thing. Evil grabs us when we are all sleeping; pain and disintegration lie in wait. Animal horrors, all worse than you can imagine beforehand” (58). As these stories prove, we are good at imagining the worst. Moreover, it is our conscious humanity that makes our animal selves seem monstrous. The word *disaster* echoes through *The Love of a Good Woman* to the end, when Jill “took on loving” her baby “because the alternative to loving was disaster” (392). The phrase “took on” emphasizes free will of a kind rather than “natural” mother love and rather than instinct. And this, in its way, is terrifying. The alternative to loving is always still there.

Preparing for the Change: Pregnancy, Birth, Alternatives to Disaster

The ways in which motherhood renders the female body more animalistic are vexed. Despite the sardonic tone about “precious maternal antibodies” mocked in the narrator’s listening in on Kath’s reasons for nursing her baby, such antibodies *are* precious, even as this and similar moments in the book question the sacrifices made for such precious resources. And the mining of the woman’s body drastically diminishes her agency and possession of self. “Mined,” her body is less “mine” — her own. It begins, of course, before the child is born. It begins in pregnancy when the woman is not yet mother but liminal, more animal, and more monstrous because of the demands made on her body. As Kristeva describes it, the pregnant woman is possessed:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within that body growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. “It happens, but I’m not there.” “I cannot realize it, but it goes on.” Motherhood’s impossible syllogism. (*Desire* 237)

That paradox of “It happens, but I’m not there,” echoes in “Jakarta” when the then-pregnant protagonist, Kath, is at a loss about how to defend the writings of Virginia Woolf in response to criticism by people at a party. Kath “wished that her water would break. Anything to deliver her. If she scrambled up and puddled the floor in front of them, they would have to stop” (110). This wish seems to be a wilful forgetting of the child in the flood; the woman “delivered” by her own water breaking would be delivered from criticism against Woolf, the woman who spoke for “a room of one’s own,” a woman who never gave birth, a woman who drowned herself.¹¹ Moreover, in the common parlance of sacrifice and priorities, it is hard to say what Kath, this woman on the verge of motherhood, might throw out with the birth water.

This state of pregnancy as forcing the animal on the human appears with startling force in this collection, particularly again in the final story, “My Mother’s Dream”:

And she knew that I’d be there, but she thought of my birth as bringing something to an end rather than starting something. It would bring an end to the kicking in the permanent sore spot on one side of her belly and the ache in her genitals when she stands up and the blood rushes to them. . . . [A]nd she won’t have to wind bandages around her legs with their swollen veins before she gets out of bed each morning. She won’t have to urinate every half hour or so, and her feet will shrink back into their ordinary shoes. She thinks once I’m out I won’t give her so much trouble. (346)

The swelling and blood are animal, yet the extravagant response of Jill’s body to her first child is also monstrous — the bandages that Jill winds about her legs transforming her into a kind of mummy before she is a mother, and the effects of pregnancy appear to age her even as they make *her* like the baby she is about to have with the frequent urination and lack of bodily control. It is a hard lesson in empathy and unlikely to be without resentment. The swelling of genitals during sex in the first place has led to this prolonged swelling of the entire body, and once a child is born motherhood is again like “the permanent sore spot” where she has been kicked into becoming that monstrous, yet hopefully good-enough, animal.

The penultimate story in the collection, leading into “My Mother’s Dream,” is about unwanted pregnancy and abortion as well as child-birth, thus enriching its misleading title, “Before the Change.” It is set

in 1960, with the first-person narrator writing to a philosophy professor at a theological college to whom she was engaged and by whom she became pregnant. For much of the story, indications are that she has had an abortion, yet it turns out that she gave birth and put the child up for adoption without knowing the gender. Upon returning home, she finds out as an adult that her father, a doctor, has been performing illegal abortions for years. Her own mother died in childbirth. When the narrator is suddenly asked to assist her father with a procedure, “Out of the womb now came plops of wine jelly, and blood, and somewhere in there the fetus. Like the bauble in the cereal box or the prize in the popcorn. A tiny plastic doll as negligible as a fingernail. I didn’t look for it. I held my head up, away from the smell of warm blood” (321). Combining the artificial with the body’s dead cells are the fetus as “bauble,” “prize,” “doll,” “fingernail.” The “warm blood,” however, is the woman’s.

The main character’s memory of giving birth, preceding this abortion, links the two experiences in the alien nature of the other coming out of the woman’s body: “I was stretched to the limit and convinced that I couldn’t do a thing to move what felt like a giant egg or a flaming planet and not a baby at all” (320). Some pages later, when in “My Mother’s Dream” Jill dreams that “She had left her baby out overnight, she had forgotten about it. Left it exposed somewhere as if it was a doll she was tired of,” this knowledge is of “her responsibility and mistake” (340). She fears that “There would never be any room in her for anything else. No room for anything but the realization of what she had done” (342). Upon waking up from this common dream, she is filled with “the joy to find herself forgiven” (342). But she might not have been had the drugged baby died. This doubling of what might have been and what was, linked to her guilt and her joy in motherhood, adds up to being haunted by that self. She has been made into, and broken by being, a mother.

Winnicott argued, with Freud, that the literary text can function as a dream, releasing the dreamer, the reader. Jill’s dream — like her daughter-narrator’s story — also functions much like the transference between analyst and analysand, in which Winnicott identified a “potential space” for the constitution and consolidation of subjective identity (Newman 31). Dreams are everywhere in *The Love of a Good Woman* — some but not all of them occurring in sleep. Again and again they prove that nothing is “unthinkable” because our minds, like our bod-

ies, are not entirely within our control. Sex is monstrous because of how it transforms us. In the title story of the collection, Enid dreams of copulation with “fat squirming babies or patients in bandages or her own mother” (57). These scenes represent sex with the self — as baby, as pregnant woman (foreshadowing Jill the mummy), and as mother — a self that is forever changed.

Munro’s most recent collection of stories, *Dear Life* (2012), ends with this: “We say of some things that they can’t be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do — we do it all the time” (319). The context for this undeserved forgiveness, in a section that Munro calls “the first and last — and the closest — things I have to say about my own life” (255), is her real-life betrayal of her mother by not traveling from Vancouver to Ontario for her funeral. One reason for this absence was her young children, but it was not the only reason. It is not unthinkable, or unforgivable, that Munro did not travel home to mark her mother’s death, to prove her love, or to prove that she — or her mother — was a good woman, though her own status as a mother was a good-enough excuse for her non-attendance as a daughter. But even in the raw voice of author-narrator that she characterizes as self-forgiveness, a legacy of unforgiveness is implicit in her writing about memory and her memory about writing; as long as one cannot forget, one cannot forgive. We humans are unlike most animals in our capacity to remember, but memory contributes to our monstrous lives.

We forgive ourselves not once and are done with it but many times for the same failures. For mothers in Munro’s reading of the world, this is the burden of being not good enough and of knowing it.

NOTES

¹ As Catherine Sheldrick Ross argues, we have learned how to read Munro’s work from the writer herself. For details of how *The Love of a Good Woman* came to be, from stories that appeared in the *New Yorker* “in very different form,” with editorial pressures there brought to bear on the collection as it stands, see Thacker (474-91).

² In response to Munro’s earlier works, Barbara Godard asks, “What is a woman to do? To become like a man and monstrous or to retire to a separate sphere in the kitchen or sewing room, traditional angel of the house . . . ?” (49). I do not see this as the binary in Munro’s books, certainly not in her later ones. Rather, Munro sketches a spectrum of possibilities between animal and monster that a maternal human might inhabit — with the troubling caveat that this maternity makes her less human in the first place. For a reading different from mine, see Duffy.

³ Redekop's study addresses *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1979), *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), *The Progress of Love* (1986), and *Friend of My Youth* (1990).

⁴ This does not do away with the notion of the clown-mother that Redekop identifies in Munro's work but incorporates that figure, the stretched and bruised woman ironically but inevitably dehumanized, first by giving birth to, and then by caring for, another human, along with the expectations inherent in that task. Brad Hooper sees this book as moving away from Munro's earlier "mother characters often set up as complainers, whiners, discontented with their lot in life" (120). He identifies in this collection "an evening out of sympathy, a broadening out of understanding of both men and women and what they did with their lives" (120). I take Hooper's point; however, overall I see the evening out of sympathy in this book as existing less between women and men than between generations — specifically between mothers and children.

⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reader of this essay for emphasizing the mixed messages about Willens that Mrs. Quinn gives Enid.

⁶ In her compelling article, "Searching Bluebeard's Chambers: Grimm, Gothic, and Bible Mysteries in Alice Munro's 'The Love of a Good Woman,'" Judith McCombs argues that "disturbing power emanates in great part from [Munro's] transformations of Grimm's Bluebeard tales, compounded with other Grimm tales, Gothic romance, and Bible myths" (1). These are tales, romances, and myths in which monstrous mothers figure prominently.

⁷ Anne Enright has mused that "It is not clear why a child should be threatened by the work a writer does, as opposed to, say, the work a cook does (who might just as easily bat a child away), or why a mother's imaginings are, in Munro's fiction, such an invitation to disaster. . . . Munro makes fiction from her anxiety about making fiction, that mixture of distraction and attention, absence and desire." Most of Munro's protagonists are not writers, yet obsessive love seems to stand in for obsessive writing in a number of her stories. Perhaps the writer who can imagine such horrors, like the mother who gives birth, cannot help but become tainted by the act of creation.

⁸ Important to note here is the effectiveness with which Munro's story enriches the protests made by scholars such as Linda R. Williams about the mother-daughter bond and "matriarchal and matrilineal networks" as the locus of "authentic female communication" that results in a "controlling metaphor in feminist studies" (52).

⁹ Janice Doane and Devon Hodges are among those who more recently have deconstructed Winnicott's theories, in particular in regard to his likening the therapist-patient relationship to the mother-child relationship, with himself as the usually bad mother in the dynamic. Doane and Hodges note that "The role of the bad mother is, in fact, empowering. So why insist on the primacy of the good mother?" (28). Furthermore, while elucidating the debt that Winnicott had to Melanie Klein, they also point out flaws in his emphasis on the mother as a mirror to her child, and they argue that his theory "freezing motherhood into a fixed, ahistorical category also obscures the diverse and changing needs of women as workers and reproductive social beings in a multicultural society" (29).

¹⁰ For a discussion of this aspect of the story, see Morgenstern.

¹¹ Scurr argues that Munro succeeds in an aim at which Woolf felt herself to have failed — "to tell the truth about her 'own experience as a body'" (32).

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