



Text by Rosanna McLaughlin.

What if, when you gave birth, it wasn't only the ligaments of your pelvis that stretched and frayed like fleshy rope, allowing your bones to open, your body to redefine itself, allowing another being to tear right through you? What if it wasn't only your body that ripped and duplicated in this act of equal parts magic and carnage, but your sense of self? What if, whoever you thought you were before, in that moment you became something else, became part of something completely enormous and ancient and utterly indifferent to you?

And what if this new you doesn't align with the past you? What if you're tormented by the dreams you had before? If you were a building, would your foundations crack under the pressure? What's that locked up in the basement? Another version of you, a ghost, a thudding baseline, a memory of freedom, of sticky floors and getting fucked and running your nails down someone's back and throwing your arms around a friend you just made, or a friend you've known for years, either way, someone with whom to give the big fat finger to suffocating normalcy in the toilet at 4am? A feathered version of you with giant talons and a hedonist's heart, but an idealist, too, who lives for their friends and the promise of the world they can build together, a world of communal living and pooled resources and kicking, always kicking, at the edges of what's possible. A version who is not welcome at the school gates, who cannot stand and talk to other mums about kitchen conversions and wood-burning stoves and whether organic snacks are actually as healthy as they say they are and ballet lessons and swimming lessons and soft play centres and corner sofas and husbands who earn more but do less and never appear at pick-up time. A version who is so alarmed by the contrast between who you feel you are and who you are expected to be that it must be hidden from view, pushed down the stairs and into the dark, and yet she calls to you, her baseline echoes through your arteries, pumping through your blood-vessels, asking who have you become.

Because what if you never belonged to that world of school-gate chat, anyway? What if it was never your mother tongue. What if it's a language for which, sure, you have learnt some of the vocabulary – mortgage, tutors, Ocado delivery – even if you could never speak it with a convincing accent. What if it's not something you can sneer at, secure in the comfort that comes from thinking yourself above a thing to which you ultimately belong, thinking you're somehow different to those losers, but only different in the way that twins feel different, when their mum gives them money to buy something from the gift shop, and they choose two identical hats but in different colours in order to show the world how unique they are? What if it makes no difference to you if you choose red or blue, if the hat is otherwise fundamentally the same? What if, where you came from, nobody wore those hats at all. What would happen if you wore the clothes that people wore where you came from? What would they say at the school gates then? Would they tighten the belts of their woollen coats, tighten the muscles of their faces? Would they stop inviting you to soft play, or would they invite you more, frisky at the brush with realness, the promise of a project?

What if we are all a collection of fragmented, contradictory visions of a person? Like looking out over the city from the top of a tower block, and seeing all the conflicting ideas for how a place should be, skyscrapers and low-rise council housing and Victorian terraced streets, post-modernism and utilitarianism and a tents beneath bridges and slum housing latterly transformed into desirable real estate; like seeing a hundred different identities that make no sense alongside each other but which somehow coexist. What if you took a cross section of your brain and you, too, were a hundred different visions of a person, but thank god your consciousness has evolved to trick you into thinking there is continuity, that there is a single version of you, that you make sense, that you have a story that can be followed, that you are moving in one direction and your life has a coherent meaning. But what if – oh shit, oh no no no – what if one day this genius trick your brain plays on you stops working? What if your sense of self shatters like a window, a big bay window on a nice terraced street near a good school and some lovely independent coffee shops, a window that some little prick on a bike has thrown a brick through for no particular reason other than why not. What if you saw all the versions of yourself lying on the carpet of the front room, a thousand shards of you, old and new, and there was no way of piecing them back together. What if you held the shards in your hands, and the jagged edges drew blood? Would this not be terrifying?



What if you were able to see, too, how many selves are bound up in the construction of just a single one of those buildings that make up the skyline? What if, as well as the person rich enough to buy the home or poor enough to struggle renting it, you also saw the men who cast the foundations, rolled the steel, laid the bricks, plumbed the water supplies, saw the women who stayed at home, sometimes coping sometimes not coping, sometimes cooking and cleaning and looking after children and sometimes not, depending on how successfully they managed to hide their ambitions in the deepest crevices of their souls, or how successfully they subsumed their wants and needs into the role of mother. What if you could see this social history that hangs around every building, and it wobbled and glowed like a giant ectoplasm? A ghost of labour rarely acknowledged, except in those moments where the outcome is so severe that it splits through the skin of the world, bursting into sight, like the poor bastards who built the pyramids or the football stadiums in Qatar?

What if you realised that the soft furnishings inside your own home were in fact cast in concrete. What if, unknown to anyone else, the roof had blown off, and heart-shaped balloons had got tangled in the twisted and exposed metal rebar. This is not trad-wife. This is not cottage-core. This is not tending to your kitchen garden, darning tiny socks, cuddling your babies by the wood-burning stove, baking bread with ancient grains, wondering what will happen to your vegetable delivery on Tuesday when you're at Pilates. This is not breast is best or linen tea-towels. This is not skylights and inside-outside living and kitchen islands and just managing to squeeze the new sofa through the hallway and into the front room without having to take the door off the frame, or putting little felt stickers on the bottom of the mid-century dining chairs so the kids don't scrape the terracotta tiles. This is a reckoning with the brutality of intense psychic change. This is standing with your eyes wide open and every nerve on end and feeling the full force of an ancient identity crunching your bones. This is remaining awake during the operation. This is seeing beyond what you're meant to see, and in the process attaining a knowledge as profoundly beautiful and full of possibility as it is disgustingly painful. This is touching the rawest material. If you slip you could crack your skull on a concrete curtain. This is a haunted house.

Hard Love

Hannah Perry

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