(M)OTHERING

an anthology

edited by **Anne Sorbie and Heidi Grogan**

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Introduction

(M)othering is a universally understood phenomenon that speaks to the act of becoming something unexpected and entirely outside ourselves. And this book is a collection of writing and art about that. On these pages, fifty-seven contributors illuminate the kind of gritty, body mind soul transformations that only the mothering myth can evoke. Their work will take you to wonder and wildness, kindness, beauty, grief, love. This book encompasses written and visual work that questions the act of mothering another human being… whether or not the individual in the mothering role is, in a traditional way, a mother at all.

These writers and artists show us what it means to create, to birth something, to love it, to suffer loss, to let go. They share their truths about trans-generational trauma. Some write of broken women, mothering their mothers and sisters, choosing not to be mothers. Having many mothers. Mothering grown children. Men who want to be mothered. Others tackle identity, adoption, abortion, addiction, self-care, sacrifice, nature and nurture, making art, unravelling, invention, loneliness, anger, laughter and joy. They are queer, Métis, Indigenous, French, male, Jewish, Mennonite, descendants of the Niisitapi (Blackfoot) and the Cree, settlers and immigrants. In unison, they speak about experiences far beyond the pathologizing of the pregnant female body.

The poetry, prose and art in the *(M)othering* anthology are presented and arranged as if part of an open conversation. A flow and an exchange begins with Sheri-D Wilson's "Mother," a poem in

which we are invited to consider the anthropology of our subject, to stand with her at a liminal line where ambiguity and disorientation reign. The dialogue that follows is a sharing of authenticity, bravery and vulnerability; a discourse moving through states of being to Katherena Vermette's "egg," Joan Crate's "Song of the Seven Eves," Mary Warren Foulk's "Vision" and Amy Dryer's painting, "The Night Time Rituals." Marie-Manon Corbeil offers "As (M)other As Artist" and signals a great void when she says, "Between sadness and hope, there was art." What she proposes is taken up and answered/echoed later in "Date Night," by artist Kyle Nylund. His figure drips mother-blood.

Mothering is neither a linear experience nor easily confined to a consistent form practised by all who mother/care for their siblings, parents, their colleagues and friends or their children. To that end, the arrangement of works continues as an exploration rather than a traditional arrangement of genre and subject, and you, the reader, are invited to engage with the contributors in the demystification of mothering. Sanita Fejzić, in concert with the artist Ambivalently Yours, speaks to raising a child with her wife, and Kelly S. Thompson to caring for her dying sister. Joan Shillington's beautiful "Daughters" takes us to the image of water, to "oceans swoosh," to "sand, stones." Barb Howard's "Bigfoot Therapy," to the strangeness and disorientation of the empty nest, while Chynna Laird and Penney Kome speak to the generations of love that filled their experiences of being mothered. Rona Altrows takes us to 1974 and the kind of deeply flawed, institutional bias within which mothers were expected to function. Yvonne Trainer moves us, to and within "Halifax Public Gardens," and Aritha van Herk to the hilarious and "The Unfathomable Attraction of the Man Who Wants a Mother."

(M)othering concludes with Natalie Meisner's poem, "Left Me Open." "How much meaning / can one word hold" her first two lines ask. Indeed, how much meaning can one word, one act, one "change" in identity encode?

Ultimately, you, the reader, and all who have mothered and been mothered, will answer that question. On these pages, fifty-seven writers and artists are grateful, wounded, elated, limping, filled with sadness and joy. They come to us with wounds shining. Their truths, words and images attest to how mothering shatters and shapes us oh-so-dreadfully and oh-so-wondrously.

The skilled panoply of styles published here, both written and visual, are from contributors who reside in North America from Vancouver to Tucson, Toronto to Santa Fe, and places in between. They speak to the experience of what it means to create, to love, to be devastated and to share truths about who they/we are.

They stand in the belly of her/their/his/story. They are where they come from, what they've experienced, what they've created. Their work expresses and illuminates not only the kind of body, mind and soul search that the mothering myth evokes. Their work speaks—and loudly—to the fact that we are all othered in some way. This book belongs; it is theirs and yours and ours.

Anne Sorbie and Heidi Grogan

Le Pèlerinage

Sabine Lecorre-Moore & Patricia Lortie

Mother

Sheri-D Wilson

let me name this place
incognito,
for it is no place at all,
no one may claim it
as their own

no one owns this place,
we are all visitors here,
we all came from nothing
but spirit and star

let us listen to the wind in the trees
naked as a cloudless sky,
for she will tell us
everything we need to know
about ourselves.

here now,
my tongue is parched
dry as sun bone sand,
I gag on the burning land
I once hoped to unearth

discover at my root,
the hourglass is shattered
I cannot find the past

stripped of my name,
my heart,
my place
and my womb.

mother, I'm balancing on the discord
of an unknown quest.

mother, may I have a choice?

yes, you may
choose the choice
to save this place
but you cannot own anything

a seed is not a flower, a
drop is not a stream, a
tree is not a forest, to
sleep is not to dream.

mother, how on earth
can I birth a child into this rot?

child, from your first breath
to your last, you will be sorry
and I am sorry for that,
please know, once you make the choice,
you make the choice
for life.

I make this choice for you, mother
there is no ancestral right,
I live with the choices
I make

in life
I own nothing,
nothing owns me.

My conscience will bow to you
when there is not enough
water to drink,
My conscience will bow to you
when there is not enough
food to eat,

I vow to bow to you, mother
in your devastation

what is life
when so much has been taken?

mother, may I love you?

child, life begins
with a breath
listen as I exhale
through the leaves—
you are not alone

mother wave water
mother tide moon
mother sun ocean earth
as gone as everything holy

I feel the waters rising

mother, may I
live?

Toward Hygge[1]

Vivian Hansen

Where the Me becomes We,
like a slow saunter,
hand in hand toward a candlelit supper for two.
Like a ring of hands held,
around a pine tree in Canmore,
to sing and dance as the Winter Solstice passes.

In my sixtieth year, which also happens to correspond with Canada's
    150th birthday,
I am walking toward solstice
and offer a backward glance to women before me.
Mother and grandmother, my Danish Bedstemor.[2]
They should be more than a backward glance.
They should be more than old breasts that map my DNA,
my forward motion in Canada.
They are cloven on the inside
because of immigration.
Their tongues split in two, Danish and English.

The way tongues grow together after a piercing.
My women conquer the cleaving. They seek hygge,
how it might dance in this new land.

> Bedstemor has been working for weeks now on a Sengeteppe,[3]
> a bedspread white and light and heavy as spring snow.
> She prepares squares
> of a lacy snowflake pattern,
> all of which will be bound together
> in a final large spread.

[1] A place of comfort; a verb of Being.
[2] Formal name for Grandmother.
[3] A blanket for the bed.

As each square is completed,
Bedstefar[4] asks: *Har du gøre færdig med en andet fire-kante,*
lille mor?
Have you finished another square, little mother?

He loves to watch her ebony eyes that she will mostly entrust
to the white squall of crochet.
Then, as her eyes
turn to him, she offers two black pools.

Square is too simple.
It is design, four elemental corners of knowing.
This is håndearbeje/handiwork. The prayer of hands
imitates God's design in four;
a quatrain of purpose; an impulse of links.

Hvem er du gør sengeteppe for? asks Bedstefar.
Who are you making the sengeteppe for?

For one of her girls. Whoever will need it the most.
She says this to avoid prophecy: naming one
of her daughters as someday needing—more than the other.
There are things that cannot be. Until they are.

Eldest Anna, husband Eduard and two sons
prepare for immigration.
Anna despairs, a fear she might abandon hygge.

All I want is our home here,[5]
our own furniture that we have had for years.
I know it is not fancy, but it is ours!
Our hygge. And so is the garden, my flowers and plants.
It is precious to me, don't you see?

[4] Formal name for Grandfather.
[5] Memoirs of Anna Hansen, October 25, 1960 (unpublished).

Bedstemor's Sengeteppe hangs in lush white lengths across a bed.
It is a rich thing that gropes for endings,
relaxing its links over the four corners.
The cotton is sturdy and heavy
like almond icing.
The Sengeteppe collects air, wind, fire, and water.

Air, for the scent of firewood and peat burning, settling into
tough strands that Bedstemor linked.
Fire, for the passion between them, the faith that keeps them whole,
while storms rage around them.
Water, for unseen mists in Danish autumns.
Earth, for what is and what shall be, if there is blessing.

Hygge is the moment where You become We
as we lay beneath four elements.

When her daughter, son-in-law, and grandsons prepare to leave,
Bedstemor gathers the Sengeteppe into a box to give to Anna.
This daughter will need it the most.

Ship route: Le Havre, Southampton, Montreal

Anna's tears become the ocean.
Despondent waters with no vision but grey.

This is too horrible.
I may as well plunge into the deep of the ocean
so the hawks can have me, I am no good anyway so why not?
I staggered along the corridor of the ship
around the corner of the boathys [sic]
only 2–3 yards from the railings.
And who was standing right there? Eduard.
And I run straight into his arms and believe me, it felt good.[6]

[6] Memoirs of Anna Hansen, October 25, 1960.

My mother is tall enough to wave the white bedspread like a flag over the bed. Its cloth settles like a prairie snowstorm. I plant my little self on the opposite side of her. In a housework dance between the two of us, we smooth down the links and white ropes of cotton, taking care to make it flat and beautiful, like a field of snow dreams. This repetition, this routine, is a pattern that I know as a fresh movement each day. A little girl must learn how to find hygge.

Anna once pleaded for answers from her parents.
What to do about the desperate loneliness on a flat.flat prairie.
The mountains so close—stone refusing hygge.
Bedstemor offered more words: what you don't know and don't
    understand, leave it.
Live your life with what you know.

What you know is hygge;
the struggle with ephemera, realize that new things require a name
in English.
The cleavage of the tongue closes in on itself, after the pierce.
Sengeteppe. Bedspread. That Hygge Thing that warms the We of Us.

I pluck a Colour Life paint chip bookmark
from a book I am reading.
It is a yellow called 'Faceless,'
so light as to be the breath of a moon.
So subtle but intrusive, so that one may never notice the law of it;
how it couples with light, and lies down
in a slumber where skin strokes a moonlight.
It is hygge that holds the mtDNA of yellow, so distant
in mother-generations. Its milk perceived
only in mitochondrial tones.
If I lie down with this colour,
I will sleep in deep alpha bones—knogler.[7]

[7] Bones. Also the root word of "knowledge," where the bones were cast for divination.

Anna says: *I am repairing the Sengeteppe.*
There was so much dust and dirt in it, I was afraid it would fall apart.
But it hung together.
Dad strung it over a clothesline in the basement,
then stitched and repaired some of the holes in it.
Bedstemor said it must go to whoever needed it the most.
Anna is never happier than when she binds old mysteries together.
She decides to release some of her power.

This is what a Crone does when she senses
the end of things.
Repair may be in order.

I covet the Sengeteppe.
I want its heft and hard feel
of its links in my lap, on my bed.
I want the fingertip stretch between myself
and my Bedstemor, like Michelangelo's painting:
God touching the soul of Adam, fingertip to fingertip.

Anna gives it to me. Watches my eyes for signs of delight.
My hands stroke the crochet links,
making smooth the white lines that sometimes mound
over a bed. All my life I've curled my fingers in between
my Bedstemor's håndearbejde squares in my sleep, covered by
her prayers.
Only now do I begin to see patterns, geometrics of hope,
all fabrics and fabrications turning
and imposing angles of life—toward hygge.

Mange tak, Bedstemor. Many thanks.
I whisper to the air, to her, listening.
In the place where I speak, Bedstemor smiles.
Each crochet link is a path, a trail of homilies
for mothers who were broken by immigration.

In this Canada, hygge divines
a place of rest.

My daughter stands in the bedroom doorway as my voice stumbles
over words that tell her this story.
I needed the Sengeteppe the most.
I belay this word so her ears absorb it as a necessary noun;
a link to her great-grandmother.
I needed the Sengeteppe the most.
Not my mother, my sister, my aunt, my cousin. Me.

That's a beautiful story, mom.
Her long fingers stroke the old Sengeteppe, slide along its re-stitched links.
Her touch is a dialect between herself and her mothers.
I seek her face, her black eyes, to catch a hint of her thoughts.
She looks back at me, smiling. *Hygge*.
That word reminds me of hug.
Her eyes glisten like the old woman who made the Sengeteppe,

those black stones, gleaming
under a slow creek of tears.

The Crossing

Norma Kerby

did you weep before you
stepped into the dinghy

did your dry mouth moan as
you clutched her hand tighter

was drowning less a tragedy
than the horrors left behind

in the mother other robes you wore through underworlds of
persecution torture slavery genital mutilation
you could not bear to think of her laughing smile smashed

was that the risk your other mother mind
tried to snatch from darkness

a void in which you hid your fractured soul
imprisoned until that shore of last decision

non-life in cold sea sinking
her fine black hair spread wide like waves

Marsupiak

E. D. Morin

I once wrote a story about a man with a prosthetic womb. The man, Geo, is married to the head researcher at the pharmaceutical corporation where the device is being developed. The Marsupiak, in other words, is his wife's invention, and it is Soleil's desire that leads Geo to be fitted with the experimental device. Believing in the egalitarianism of marriage, Soleil convinces her husband that since she carried and birthed their now three-year-old daughter Ursa, it is his turn. But all of this is backstory. The real action is more mundane.

Geo and Ursa, whom he is caring for during his "confinement," go for a walk to the grocery store. As they walk, Geo experiences twinges of pain and is unable to carry his daughter, even when she begs him, even after she sits on the sidewalk and refuses to budge, so that Geo is forced to tug her along by the hand. On their return home, Ursa plays in the empty bathtub and then wanders into the couple's bedroom, the scene of her own conception. Then she finds Geo unconscious on the living room rug. She lies down, whimpering, not touching him as he is wet with amniotic fluid. Carry me, she cries.

The story, titled "Carry Me," was rejected by a handful of literary journals and then I shelved it. But it haunts me still. There's something bleak and ham-fisted about the work, and yet something in the tale feels ripe with possibility. Like so many abandoned stories, there's always a chance to revisit the work and discover ways to improve it. Sometimes with failed stories, lack of good editing is the trouble. Other times the narrative drags. And sometimes in failed stories, I locate the ragged edges of my psyche, dark places of prejudice and carelessness and outdated archetypes. What is it about Geo and Soleil's tale that won't let me go?

Maybe the story haunts me because of what it might say about me. About my entire, conflicted experience of motherhood. Entire? As if I am done with mothering. As if motherhood is ever truly done. Even as they approach their thirties, my daughter, my son, continue to want mothering.

The singular urge to parent arose when I was about twenty. A needing to hold, a sense of cradling a tiny someone. Where do such stirrings arise from? In retrospect, I suspect hormones or, more aptly, my lizard brain. Whatever its source, the yearning was most definitely NOT rational. I can't explain why I was suddenly so *sure* about my wanting. The third of six children, I'd had a reasonably happy childhood—until puberty struck and my mother fell ill. Watching my mother, it seemed that parenting had exacted a terrific cost. Further, I bore a deep sense of being ill-suited to motherhood. I'd long suspected that I was flawed in this regard and wondered if I could form a deep human connection with anyone. It seemed unlikely that I'd marry. What I really wanted was a career, a life of adventure, a life of discovery. Mostly I wanted to be a man, or at least to have what I'd long perceived men had. Marriage, if it ever transpired, was a distant planet. Mothering was beyond even those reaches. Most unlikely.

I can barely recall the circumstances preceding the urge, this wanting to hold. Was I returning from spending time with someone? One of the nerdy boys who occasionally asked me out? Or had I been alone? And where? Perhaps the university, working through math problems in a library carrel. What I do recall is walking home on the streets of south Edmonton, crossing a freeway bridge. Concrete underfoot, the edges of ragged green foliage in my peripheral vision. And then a brief tug, a glimmer pulsing through me. A stirring that left a lasting mark. From that stirring, that brief, crackling sense of cradling, I thought that, yes, I might be capable of raising a child. All at once I could imagine mothering. A feeling that I could love. That I was actually capable of loving and caring for someone. A child.

The audacity of that. Suddenly suited to motherhood, to riding out all that it might bring. That I might be a person who *wanted* a child. But how many? My thoughts spun to imagining two, no more than two, and in that I was prescient. And then, naively, wanting boys because hadn't being a girl disappointed in so many ways? I didn't want my children to experience that dysphoria.

What did I want, really?

At its core, "Carry Me" is a reversal story. Soleil, the career-minded workaholic. Geo, the pregnant stay-at-home dad. Even their names: woman as sun, man as earth. But I could see that in my efforts to

topple the usual gender myths, I hadn't addressed much at all. I'd simply swapped the roles of husband and wife, had made the once-fertile Soleil masculine and all-powerful, had taken Geo, a former airline pilot, and grounded him, rendered him passive.

It strikes me now that I was merely echoing stories of Greek gods and other predictable tales that were part of the usual Western canon, the kinds of stories I'd been reading since childhood. Could I learn from these myths and carry them someplace new?

Perhaps the telling was the problem. Ursa as the narrator, a sometimes precocious, sometimes incomprehensible three-year-old. Ursa is able to sense that something is amiss in her world, but her voice is pure need. In this, nothing is resolved. Meanwhile, we learn little of Geo's motivations except that he is weakened and depressed. He misses being a pilot. He misses a more active life. He is losing his fight to bear a child.

What is left is Soleil, of whom we have glimpses. She does not appear physically, only through the narrator or spoken about in simplified conversations between Ursa and Geo in which, more often than not, Geo corrects what Ursa says. An example. The artificial womb he is fitted with, the marsupial *Marsupiak*, Ursa mistakenly calls the *Super Yak*. And another. When Ursa calls her mother, Soleil, an *expecutive*.

These fleeting details say more about Ursa and very little about Soleil and what drives her. What possesses Soleil to create such a device? Does she sense she's crossed an ethical line by having her husband test the Marsupiak? And what of the kangaroo dad and his daughter Ursa, the little bear?

Sometimes symbols flit through a writer's pen, through the synaptic taps on the keyboard. They surface unquestioned and then somehow survive the editing phase. But how do they belong in this story? And, perhaps more interesting, what do these symbols say about me? Which is why failed stories are such gifts. The possibility of sifting through the writing and discovering what's actually been transmitted. Asking myself, is this what I believe, is this what I mean to say? Or is it something I mechanically and unquestioningly carry around with me and deposit as I write? What is the truth anyway?

Searching for answers, I delve into the Greek myth of Callisto. There are multiple versions of the myth, but in one version Callisto appears as King Lycaon of Arcadia's daughter, a companion of Artemis sworn to virginity. The god Zeus disguises himself as Artemis and rapes Callisto. Out of this violent, fraudulent union a son is born, Arcas. When Zeus' wife Hera hears of her husband's misdeeds, she aims her jealous anger at Callisto and Arcas and transforms them into bears. The story comes full circle when the huntress Artemis kills the bear mother and son and exiles them skyward where they become Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, two very recognizable northern constellations.

Callisto, in another version of the myth, is a proficient knitter, able to fashion beautiful objects out of yarn. This is a gift too. In one scene, Ursa describes how Geo wove the living room rug out of discarded bits of climbing rope, another remnant of Geo's former, active life. That Geo fashioned the rope rug and that Ursa loves to play there. A universe unto itself, the rug is where Ursa weaves her own tales. The rope rug thus appears to symbolize a broken umbilical cord, a lifeline that fails to save the father or his unborn child. Ursa whimpers beside her father and wishes he would get up, she wishes he would carry her and hold her in his arms. Most of all, she wishes to supplant the being that grows inside the Marsupiak.

We want to believe that we are agents of our own destinies. We want to think that we choose our lives and our families. But no matter how much we think we choose, fate or chance or serendipity is writ large over our efforts at reproduction. Becoming a parent is all chance. How much can we even know about ourselves or the myriad possibilities of two people coming together? Reproduction. That supreme moment of inattention when the mammals in us supersede everything else, when our brains are turned OFF.

Arrogance. Hubris. To think we can control our biology. We might hope, but we will never make a child to order. We cannot replicate ourselves (barring cloning) nor would we truly want to, yet we also can't help but replicate ourselves in countless ways. We overlook our flaws and hope that the best of us will appear in our children,

but we have no control over any of it. Our hopes for our children almost always miss the mark anyway. Instead, children surprise us in inexplicable ways, in ways that expand our human experience. This is the bear in our lives, the wild gift of our irrational, mammalian selves.

We exile the bear at our peril.

When I gave birth to my daughter, she entered the world face up. The delivery was long and difficult. A huge tear needed to be sewn up, and the blood loss was excessive. In the week following, I could barely rise without blacking out. Stitching this experience into my life, I told myself that my daughter had arrived face up, even though the more conventional face down would have been considerably easier on both of us, because she needed to see what was happening. She needed to witness her own arrival. I told myself that there was a moment in the delivery when our pubic bones formed two opposing triangles that made a butterfly. This whimsical and unscientific tale helped me find the beauty in her difficult birth.

Mothering my daughter, I would learn so much more.

I had wished for sons, as if wishing made a difference to the outcome, as if gender even mattered. But that was my thinking at the time. Having been raised in the binary, I was still stuck in the binary. The truth is, at the moment of birth, all I cared about was a child, a healthy living child. And now I know the true gift of mothering a daughter, how she's shaped me. She humbles me with her grace and intellect, her profound understanding of the world, the love she inspires in me. A life without her is unimaginable.

The child takes a part of you, many parts. If you choose mothering and make this decision willingly, as I did, you inevitably find yourself asking during moments of sheer exhaustion and depletion, what was I thinking? Why did I want this? And then you try to imagine a life without mothering, without your remarkable children. You can't. I can't.

As a parent, I gained a true sense of my limits, a sense of how I would cope when those limits were badly exceeded, which was often. I developed capacities I didn't know I lacked. I gained a better understanding of my own mother and how hard I'd been on her in my youth. The cost of parenting has sometimes felt great. But I'm a better person for it.

Here's another Greek myth about a bear. When Atalanta is born, her father Iasus abandons her on a mountaintop because she is a girl and what he'd wanted was a boy. A she-bear discovers Atalanta and suckles her, and then a hunter finds the child and raises her. Atalanta grows to be a huntress herself, as swift-footed as Artemis. Through the she-bear's nurturing intervention, Atalanta comes into herself and discovers her own capacities, her own wildness. Later, Iasus and Atalanta are favourably reunited. I imagine the possibilities.

I imagine the possibilities of another Soleil.

Mother3
Ambivalently Yours

(M)other

Sanita Fejzić

You were born past midnight
after the alarm bell cut the night in two

—caesarian—

at 10.3 pounds
our big gift.

The doctor, a man whose head resembles the colour of a blank sheet of paper
wearing brand-name *Hunter* boots of the same frosted blush lifted you up as if with holy hands, in prayer,
"Born on Christmas day and he hath no father."
His words, spoken in a fake British accent betrayed an old mentality.

On your birth certificate my name fills the space of "father/other parent."
I am your other mother, your (m)other, but there was only room for one on the page.

In kindergarten at the Waldorf school
where the prime minister's children go to learn
two older boys zoomed across the hallway
like arrows
"Haha—t'as pas de papa!"
Their words hit me in the chest: ha! ha!
pa! pa! pa!
They darted by pa! papa!
When I asked the teacher to talk to them she said, "They're just children."
So are you, my son.

A year later, the principal of your new school suggested
I put you in karate
so you could have a "proper father figure"
"a sensei"
"a man."

I try not to get tired of explaining.
No: there is no father.
It's not that hard.
You only have mothers.
Anonymous sperm donor, yes.
No: no: no: my brother is absolutely not like your father. He is your uncle.
Just like how other people's uncles are not their fathers. (Do I really need to explain this?)

At night, we compare beauty marks in the mirror

our bodies punctuated by little islands of beautiful singularities
we find one in common on our chin—this random physical trait that unites us, mother & child.

Mother2
Ambivalently Yours

And even though you don't have my genes or DNA
my sun you have all my love dedication
delicate attention
always & always into infinity

and even though
on your birth certificate my name fills the space of "father/
other parent"
I am your other mother, your (m)other
the one that's learning to be light
to laugh when others look for a father
like that time I made you giggle at Toys Я Us
holding up a mask of Padmé Amidala to my face
exhaling in a deeply performative tone:
"I Am Your (M)other."

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