

LIA PURPURA

On Aesthetics

It is the theory which decides what we can observe.

—Einstein

There was a time, more than ten years ago now, when riding the subway was nearly impossible. Suddenly, for about a week, I could no longer unthinkingly press my body so close to the bodies of others. It was not disgust, nor the summer heat, but a surprising and originless fear. I was managing, but one afternoon on the Uptown Express, slowly, and with great distinction, everyone's face turned rat-like and sharp. Each face was vicious, unpredictable, hungry. And mine was the single soft face looking on, at once too close and isolated from the horror everyone was. By 34th Street, after only a few stops, I had to get off and walk the rest of the way to the Upper West Side where I was staying with my friend.

I returned to normal rather quickly after that incident.

Now that I'm a mother, except for being weird with exhaustion at times, nothing like this has happened since.

Once I did something I can still barely speak of, something I know, now, with certainty, is nothing like me-the-mother. In a public bathroom at a mall, a little girl was spanked and shaken for not washing her hands before eating. And though I stood near, washing my own hands, I could not dissolve the space between us, the mother, the girl and me, could not make the girl's hunger mine, move my hand into the crumpled bag of yellow popcorn, take the sheen of fake oily butter onto my fingers, lick the sheen off as she did, nor could I swell with rage like the mother, then break and release order, at any cost, into place. I mean to say I did nothing, said nothing at all. And that it was a failure of heart and imagination.

I left the bathroom feeling so weighted and slow, so stuck at the site of my failure that everywhere I went that day, the bathroom's dank, fake-floral scent, its too-bright air followed and dulled me further.

I now have a child, and because of this, it's assumed in the subtlest ways that being a mother constitutes a certain aesthetic, a frame for observations, a dependable set of responses. For example,

if someone sneezes and you, a mother, rummage around and come up with a tissue, you are likely to hear “oh, you’re always prepared” or “you’re such a good mother.” Actually, I carry tissues because I have allergies and sneeze a lot—just like my father, who never hears about being a good father for handing out Kleenex. He keeps his in a neat little packet, made expressly for that purpose. I suppose I should say, too, that I wad tissues up, before and after use, and they sift to the dark bottom of my knapsack gathering dust.

But because I am a mother, I was told a disturbing story. The story belonged to a teenager I knew who recently had a baby. I don’t think I reacted as I was supposed to—maybe not enough outrage or pity upfront. Too quietly. And not quickly enough. I watched her face as she told the story; it was round, mild and smudged by the tasks of the day and I wanted to wipe it. I never thought I would feel that way, though I do now, and often, and for people other than children. I may be over-dramatizing; perhaps I commiserated properly. It certainly wasn’t lack of anger that restrained my reaction, but the confusion that always arises when the issue, at heart, is aesthetics.

I know why she wanted to tell me her story: my response would shore up a certainty of hers about mothers, but I’m not sure she was aware of this. I’ll tell you the story and some others that gather around it which constitute, really, the whole slippery problem.

One afternoon, because she does not have a job (except for care-taking), she and the baby were sitting together on the front porch of the place they live when a planet came down, a tiny *planet* she thought, or maybe a jewel, a lit spangle; it was *something* amazing. It came to rest on the baby’s head, light as snow but it didn’t melt. It traveled, jittery, over the wrinkles on his forehead *made* by his straining to turn. She said the circle was M&M sized. M&Ms were the rule she used. This was the year laser-pointers were all the rage and you could buy them cheap and affix them to anything. Someone had a bead on the boy and held his stillness in place with crosshairs. He must have been an easy mark. I once looked through a gun’s scope and knew that crosshairs whittle a viewer’s world down to a manageable thumbnail. I remember how purely relaxing it was to see in that way, everything cropped, in focus, contained.

The target shone three concentric rings and made of the flare that could have been pain, a little red spot on the baby’s head. The men weren’t using the gun as a gun, just as a scope, but I knew, as she

herself was learning daily, all it takes is one slip. (And, as if to support this point, I heard later that day from a friend who, distracted by coughing, shot himself in the knee with a nail gun while fixing his fence.)

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This was the week my son loved the word “knee” and touching mine, his father’s, his, spoke the word like an incantation, until it lost sense and began to sound like cheers at a rally. We loved the way an ordinary word collapsed its meaning into pure sound; it made us fall together, laughing.

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The red lingered on the child’s forehead, then moved to the soft spot where the bones had not yet knitted up. As a mother, of course, one reads with both shuddery interest and fear about the fontanel and about being careful, but it always felt remarkably strong when I stroked it. Still I kept sharp things, heavy things away. A laser, though, will roam anywhere and project the shape of anything at all: Mickey Mouse ears; a glow-red heart over the place a heart should go; a clover-leaf; a lucky 7. Anything with its small heat can dance over the body.

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I have known the heat of the morning to swell the old wood of stairs, baseboards, molding, and release from within the deep core of a house something of water and dust and age, and even as a child I was pleased by that scent. As it lifted and floated on air, I’d feel I was not alone, that the scent was of my history, there in my grandmother’s house, and was conjured anew every day by the heat. I love that smell, still. It emanates light and fixes time: early mornings especially, when I stayed at my grandmother’s house to get over a cold at my leisure while my parents were working. As I came down the stairs the scent would rise and I’d move through it, toward the couch to settle in for the day with my fever. My great aunt—it was her house, too—would start cooking, before the pace

of the day overwhelmed, the scents would further complicate, and there, my body, warm with its managable aches, repaired.

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Later in the day, after I heard the girl's story, my son and I were playing in an overgrown field. And because I live these days at a crouch, I found a four-leaf clover. I wasn't searching. Nor was I hoping. It was a big one, the biggest one I'd ever seen, the size of a quarter with a shirring of very light, almost white rick-rack along the edge of each leaf. The clover was heavy and moist with dew, the stem a beautifully taut little straw of lighter, translucent green. I used to press things like this flat in a book or keep them preserved between two strips of clear tape, but that day I told my son about clovers and luck and then gave it to him to play with however he wanted.

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The laser on the baby's head was a cherry lozenge, a button, a tack. The color of holly berries, chokeable, dangerous, we keep from our son. It was all a joke. Intended to be, and no, no one was shot. Not the girl who was learning to be a mother, not the baby on whom the light was training.

The laser on the child's head, she learned by their laughter, was "just a joke." And in fact, the men parked at the curb repeated the phrase later to the police. From what the girl said, they were somewhat indignant (though she didn't say exactly that) as if everyone, she, the police, refused to admit it was funny. As if she, and not the joke itself, was causing the trouble.

The men in the car parked at the curb laughed at her confusion; in particular, how she followed the light back to the source to be sure it wasn't a holy event she just saw: something alighting. Something bestowing. What they liked especially was the way she jumped up when she noticed the light, and with one arm scrambled the air while screaming and holding the sleeping baby. It was slapstick funny, lowly as pots and pans clanging down on the head of, say, a bachelor, trying to bake his first cake. And the cake a wedding cake at that! One that later would turn out, surprise, to be his! But

first, the messy scenes with skidding, twists and turns, a flour-cloud rising, the amusing wobbly vertigo that comes from keeping too much in the air at once. They found her thus, heavily up and out of the lawn chair, pressing the baby tight, hair a mess, kicking the Coke, crashing in through the meager screen door.

And that's not all: there's more, a kind of backstory: she had been undressed by their sight, which, after it touched the boy's head, travelled up her arm, over her shoulder and bounced breast to breast. (Maybe they poked one another and said *follow the bouncing ball* and sang a simple, bawdy song. Funny to see her try to brush the beam off like an insect. Perhaps one of them thought she moved delicately then, as if she were a milkmaid, a shepherd girl, wearing a bodice of lace in which some scratchy hay was caught. *Dishabille* might not have occurred, but *prettily unselfconscious*? Maybe. For a moment, maybe. Then he would remember where he was and put the thought out of his head. Because to keep it there would mean he had seen her differently. That she was not exactly funny. And since she was trying to swat her breast and not swat the baby's head, and everything was flying apart, that was enough to think about for now, and he would laugh with the rest.)

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But that's my take. My story, not hers.

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"Why would they do that?" she asked me.

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And although it was insufficient (you'll see why), I did answer. I believe a mother should answer, as best she can, the questions put to her.

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Once in a park, I stopped to drink from a fountain and there in the the cement bowl was a silver dollar. *Lucky!* I thought and bent to

pick it up; lovelier still, wet and shining. But it resisted. I pulled and pulled until I heard laughter and realized two older boys were holding the end of fishing line looped through a tiny hole in the coin. I bent my head and walked away fast, in shame. And then they laughed louder. But when I got home and considered the scene, it was kind of funny and I wished I'd thought up the prank. I remember looking for books on practical jokes in the library.

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When Geppetto made Pinocchio he made a puppet, which of course he could manipulate, make jump at will, and dance. But he didn't want that. He wanted the boy to be real: good but imperfect. I just read the book to a friend's little girl. She liked the lying-and-consequence parts best: the donkey ears, the pole of a nose that a bird, two birds, then a whole flock could perch on. Peck at. Which hurt Pinocchio but didn't stop his being naughty. She liked that, too. It was sad-scary-funny. Or amusing-right-frightening. After the book when we were talking, she couldn't say why she liked those moments. And she couldn't decide if it was all right to like them. I said I felt the same way. I said it was complicated. And disappointed in my answer, she went right to bed.

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From their car the men watched a woman move like a puppet, but there was no moral. It was just a great scene. They liked it that way, those who would be, long ago, drunk on a rough bench after days in hot fields, at the foot of the stage of an opera buffo or vaudeville act, any travelling show. Audience, relieved of monotony, for whom banana peel slip-ups are reverie: *better him than me*, better to see *him* go down and hit hard, land on his ass and turn around steamed, as if to accuse the peel, cracked sidewalk, hole, broken step. Funny, as if it had never happened to them.

And that's the magic of burlesque: you forget, by way of extravagance, that a planet once came to your cheek, that a circle of light, the red eye of a new god travelled to find you at rest and stayed. You forget yourself. You sit back and enjoy the play.

It's someone else's fate on stage: the dumb man's, the sleeping child's, hers.

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Why would they do that?

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I was staring out at the yard no one mowed, the baby's clothes on the drying rack, the high, broken curb where the men parked their car. I was thinking: *because they just happened to find it funny. That's why. That's aesthetics. Complex. Unpredictable.*

But I said: *because they're idiots.*

Because, being a mother, I knew what she needed just then.