

Take, Eat

Tessa Meyer Santiago

She kisses herself in the mirror at Old Navy. Wearing the melon-orange velour V-neck shirt and the carpenter's jeans, she leans forward and kisses herself. Her mind is rife with possibilities: ". . . and when it's cold on the playground, I can just roll down the sleeves to cover my hands like this; . . . or when I am jumping rope, I can just roll them up like this . . ." She leans forward, bobs her head so that her blonde ponytail flips to the beat of the imaginary rope, sees her reflection in the mirror once more. She smiles at herself, one front tooth a quarter inch longer than the other still growing in. Another kiss.

I slump on the bench in the fitting room, amused, despite my exhaustion, by the pageant of one. At six years old, my daughter loves herself and her milk-belly body with a passionate, unashamed abandon. But time is precious. Waiting at home for me is my three-week-old third child. He needs the milk I carry. I throw her the turquoise corduroy dress, "All right Julia, enough of the kisses. Try this one on. We've got to get going."

"Ooooh. I'm going to look beautiful in this. It's the color of my eyes."

I was pregnant this past summer—all of every afternoon of May, June, July, and August. So I bought a tangerine maternity suit from Motherhood in the mall and a pool pass from Deseret Towers. With lycra and spandex doing their vain best, I bobbed in the deep end for those months of afternoons. From my vantage point, I watched women: Young mothers, still slim-hipped, who push

their strollers from Wymount Terrace and spend afternoons in the baby pool; large women, mothers of four, five, and six children: they wear reinforced suits, cut low over the thighs, and bounce a toddler on their hip in the shallow end while providing timely cheers for clumsy dives and handstands. Occasionally grandmothers, their flesh wobbling, appear with their grandchildren.

Then there are the nondescript women, the neither slim nor large, the just-there, whose bodies make no statements about them, their position or age. They wear dark suits with maybe a floral bodice, modestly cut; their hair is utilitarian; their skin is neither tanned nor white. These nondescript women, of all ages, constitute the female majority at Deseret Towers during the summer. Amongst our sedate, unremarkable mothers' bodies flit the blue jays and cardinals—freshman residents of DT. They sprawl in careful carelessness on the lounge chairs, in a universal pose: head thrown back, throat exposed to the sun, torso stretched like an arrow, one leg flat, the other bent at the knee. Jewelry glints from various body parts: an ankle chain, three golden studs in an earlobe, a toe ring. Worn with the confidence born of innocence. The turtle doves and the rock pigeons, in their mottled, motherly apparel, keep a wide berth, knowing they pale by comparison.

Strangely, I feel exempt from the competition this summer. Somehow, my belly endows me with a physical confidence I haven't felt in years. And the larger I get, the more confident I feel. I almost strut out of the changing room in my eighth month, wearing my girth like a medal of honor. Normally one does not accentuate a large belly with tangerine, but I love my swimsuit. It says, "I am delightfully, wonderfully, miraculously pregnant. And beautiful because of it." I am a peacock in all his finery, a ruby red-emerald pheasant dragging his tail behind him, I am the act of creation. My body is engaged in a holy work, the work for which it was designed. On this divine errand, I fear no earthly standard of beauty. They don't apply to me now. Sadly but realistically, I will be trembling next summer to show my motherly, nonpregnant body to the world. Next June, I will perch on the edge of the pool with all the other mottled matrons, like a flock of pigeons on a telephone wire watching the cars go by.

I am struck by the incongruence of what I saw this summer. Why was it that the women who had contributed the most felt the least confident? Why did they cover their bodies as if in shame, plunging themselves to the neckline, barely emerging above their breasts as they stood watching children swim? Why did the girls, who knew nothing of what breasts and hips and wombs are meant to do, rule, queens of the roost? In a better world, in a kinder, more saintly world, a mother's body would be kindly regarded, with respect and honor for what she has given, for what she has done. I am learning; a woman who mothers well gives all she has: body parts, internal organs, limbs. Some parts are temporarily donated, others irreparably affected; most of the effects are permanent. And, if she lets this mothering sink into the marrow of her bones to wrestle with her spirit, a woman's soul is wrought in the image of God.

I sit on the couch reading, watching television—it doesn't really matter what the activity. Christian, my four-year-old son, decides to do a somersault off the arm. His little body flips through the air. As he lands, his feet thud, bony heel first into the soft muscles of my thighs. I yelp my displeasure. His brown eyes open wide in genuine disbelief that his mother would object to him landing on her body. Julia tires in an afternoon sacrament meeting. I am trying to prepare for my Gospel Doctrine lesson the next hour. With absolute confidence and instinctual action, she moves the books from my lap and replaces them with her head. After all, that is what a mother's lap is for. With that same confidence born of innocence, my children use my body for their comfort and convenience. They sprawl across me as I sit; they shake me awake when they are hungry; they grab my face from behind my book so that my eyes can see what needs to be seen. No matter my wishes, they appropriate me. In their innocent invasion, they learn there is one who will always come (sometimes very slowly) in the night to save

them. And I learn through conquering the weakness of my flesh as I allow their plundering without resentment, the beginning of a godly patience and a maternal love that will serve our family well.

I could fight, I suppose, against such an invasion. I know I used to. But my body, I am learning, is a battlefield never meant to be fought on, let alone lost on. Lowell Bennion had an acquaintance who said, "Put on the level of routine everything that belongs there." He supposes she meant "we should not spend thought and energy deciding if and when we should do the chores that must be done."¹ I would like to think that I am learning that my physical responses to my children's needs are not optional; I must respond. Not that mothering is a chore, but that their needs are constant. They will not, cannot go away. Children must grow, eat, learn, question, be comforted. That is the nature of childhood. So when I made the decision to have children, I also (although I didn't realize it at the time) made the decision to mother them with the fibers of my being. As soon as I gave place in my womb for that zygote, I placed not only my heart, but my feet, legs, knees, hips, stomach, bladder, intestinal tract, breasts, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, neck, teeth, tongue, even the hair on my head at their disposal. All to be used, leant on, sucked, clung to, kicked and prodded, and generally usurped as their very own. Thus my body becomes the site of my ultimate giving, which giving can teach my soul if I choose to learn.

Every hour of the day and night I am faced with choices in how to mother with my body. For instance, I know that my newborn son, Seth, who cannot suckle and so must drink my breast milk in a bottle, feeds best when half-sitting up. He burps more easily, and the position reduces the risk of ear infections in bottle-fed babies. I also happen to know, through sad experience, that the milk goes down just as well when he lies flat on his back. At four in the afternoon, the choice is easy: Seth feeds sitting up. But at four in the morning, when I have slept in ninety-minute stretches, the decision is not so easy. All I crave is sleep, which I can almost do as I feed him lying flat on his back on the bed next to me. What is more important? My sleep or his indigestion? If I master my body, subdue the exhaustion, bring my physical reactions in line with the choice I made ten months ago, Seth feeds sitting up.

He didn't for about four days—until the guilt of my own selfishness caused me to struggle up against the pillows one 3:20 A.M. and do for my son what he couldn't do for himself. Cradled in my arms, his small eyes peering myopically towards my face, Seth drank sitting up. I won't say the feeding was any different from the others. My eyes weren't miraculously clear and the dark circles gone the next morning in return for raising myself eighteen inches. I didn't receive, as a result of my choice, the divine grace of Seth sleeping until nine the next morning. In fact, just two hours later, he snuffled and bleated his hunger. But, in my insignificant bodily suffering, my spirit was tutored somewhat in that messianic characteristic: Love thy neighbor, thy son, the flesh of thy flesh, more than self.

Having a woman's body seems to mean special tutoring in life and death. I have been pregnant four times. Each pregnancy ended in a surgical procedure. Three times, my stomach and uterus have been cut open to retrieve, in all their bloody splendor, Julia, Christian, and Seth. Each time, I have entered the mother's valley of death, bringing my body under the knife, to lie still as someone cut into my flesh to release life from my womb. What should be a joyous moment is full of fear for me. Only two months ago, I lay on the operating table trying so very hard to be brave. But I was petrified, and my body knew it: my pulse raced, I hyperventilated and vomited in an allergic reaction to the epidural. My eyes filled with tears. I really just wanted to run away. Yet I had no other choice if I wanted the life within me to live.

As I lay on the table, my mind filled with the image of Annie Dillard's tomcat, who would jump through her window at night covered with the blood of his kill. When she awoke, she found herself "covered with paw prints in blood; [she] looked as though [she] had been painted with roses." She would ask herself, "What blood [was] this, and what roses? It could have been the rose of union, the blood of murder, or the rose of beauty bare and the blood of some unspeakable sacrifice or birth."² She never knew exactly how to read that midnight canvas. And I never know when I am on that table exactly what is happening to me. Am I the site of some unspeakable horror or some unspeakable joy? Paradoxically, I am both: An open womb, a uterus pulled out onto my abdomen;

an immense pressure, an indignant cry, and a wrinkled old man's face that looks at me from beneath the hospital beanie like a Sharpei puppy. Only after I place my swollen, reluctant body on the table can I hear those first sounds of life. And no, the recovery is not swift in return for my heroism. My stomach is still bisected, the nerve endings are still cut and need to learn to stop screaming. My bowels are still sluggish with epidural, my head still pounds from the allergic reaction I knew was coming.

As I battle these symptoms, my body begins to make milk for the child who needs to be fed. When I am barely coherent, unable to sit up, the nurses bring him to me. "He's hungry," they say. "Put him to the breast." So I struggle upright, ignoring the burning incision, to cradle that little body that was so recently inside me. I turn his mouth to me and do for my son what he cannot do for himself. And I understand a little more now how the Savior would "take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people" (Alma 7:12). The demands and duties of this life, of the soul, take precedence over the travails of the body.

The other pregnancy ended in death. It was a long November Monday morning when I labored for ten hours, knowing that the end would produce only a misshapen fetus, that my body in its wisdom knew to dispel. While my body tried to perform the labor that it knew was necessary, my spirit keened. Medicine calls it a *spontaneous abortion*, but I called it. . . . Actually, I don't have a name for that desolate feeling that covered my spirit as my body labored. I only knew my baby would not be born the same time my Emperor tulips were scheduled to appear. I knew I could put the baby name books back on the shelf and stop doodling "Nicholas Kevin Santiago" on sacrament meeting programs. I knew my sister-in-law and I would not give my parents their twelfth and thirteenth grandchildren three weeks apart. But most of all, I knew I wanted with all my heart to have another child, and I grieved for what was not to be.

But I did not grieve alone. In that valley of desolation brought on by physical travail, I believe the Savior sent angels to be with me, to succor me in my infirmity: My sister who rubbed my back, changed the bath water, and who, while I was at the hospital, cleaned my house, did my laundry, and fed my children. Nurses

who looked at me with compassion, called me “dear, sweet Tess. . . . How sorry I am you are here.” Women who knew, who had labored in a similar manner in vain, their eyes looked at me with a special sweetness. A doctor who, sensitive to my pain, chose not to make me endure a surgical procedure in the sterility of his office. Rather he gave me anesthetic and a blissful ignorance as he cleaned my womb of what had been the promise of a child. Most of all, God gave me a husband who held my hand and stood by, waiting and watching, feeling helpless to stop my pain, wishing he could endure for me. Who waited for me in surgery, and whom I found sobbing in his office three days later: he too had lost a child. In all my pain, no one had noticed his. We felt the healing arms of the Savior around our hearts that week: our neighbors’ tears, hearts broken for our pain, faint whisperings of another child in time, lessons of peaceful patience from him who would gather us in his arms as a mother hen would gather her chicks.

Could I have had my heart broken to the will of the Lord another way? Would I have come so heavy laden and willingly to the Savior’s yoke? I don’t know. I do know that the death of a small, misshapen body brought light to my soul that perhaps I could not have seen any other way. I cannot help but think, as I remember those births, that this body which makes us human also can make us most divine, that the peculiar pains of a woman’s flesh teach her exquisitely, intimately. What they teach she cannot know beforehand, or even know that she needs to know, but when the pain subsides or is grown accustomed to, she realizes: sometime during the darkest of nights or mundanest of mornings, knowledge has descended like the dew from heaven and enlarged her soul.

Unfortunately, the experience has also probably enlarged her hips and thighs. If she’s anything like me, she bears the physical scars of that battlefield: the burst blood vessel on my left cheek appeared during labor with Julia. It still spreads spidery-red fingers across my face. The root canal brought on by Christian’s pregnancy left me with a porcelain crown. A fresh, seven-inch maroon scar bisects my lower abdomen. Just below it is another, faded to flesh. Stretch marks ornament my breasts and hips like silver ribbons. My hips are two sizes wider, my feet a size bigger than when

I was married—my very bones have expanded in response to my mothering. Some of the effects are temporary: just for the moments of pregnancy. The bleeding gums, the weakened bladder, the hair that falls out in clumps, the intermittent back pain, the aching hips. These pass in their time, but the memory remains.

In that memory lies the glory of this earthly body: though we may be resurrected in a perfect frame, the lessons taught me by my mother-body will rise with me. The sacrifice, the pain, the fear and faith of my mothering will sink into the depths of my soul and remain to be with me in the eternities. My spirit and this woman's body inseparably connected constitute my fullness of joy. Time writes its messages on all of us. For me, and for the women whom I watched this summer, our very bodies have become our book of life, "an account of our obedience or disobedience written in our bodies."³ To what have we been obedient? To the purpose for which we were made: to provide a body and a safe haven for the spirits entrusted to our care. If we mother well, we wear out our lives bringing to pass the lives of others. Of the physical fruits—our wider hips, our sagging breasts, our flatter feet, and rounder buttocks—we need not be so ashamed.

I'm sitting at the computer trying to figure out just exactly what we, technically, have in the checking account. She comes around the corner from the kitchen. She's been trying on swimming suits like a teenager getting ready for a date. All she's really going to do is swim in the apartment pool of her youngest child, Alexandra.

"Should I wear this one," she asks, holding up the black, skirted, 1940s-style option in her left hand, "or this one, with the black bottom and floral top."

"I don't know, Mom," I say. "Try the flowered one."

She returns a few minutes later, her sixty-five-year-old body clad in lycra and spandex. Her legs are still long but marbled by the varicose veins of seven pregnancies. Her chest is still broad, sprinkled with freckles from decades of summers, but her bosom is

small, suckled dry by our hungry mouths. Her face is lined, from eyelid to mouth corner. She stands at the corner, one leg crossed in front of the other, as if that contortion will make her half the size.

She looks beautiful with her silver-white hair, her green eyes, her long brown legs and arms. I tell her so.

“You look beautiful, Mom. You are beautiful, Mom. I wish I had your legs, even your sixty-five-year-old legs. But, if it’s any consolation, I don’t think anybody is going to be looking at you. You’re not quite part of the desired demographic group.”

She still hides herself as she complains, “Oh, I know. I know. But I hate this aging body of mine. Getting old is so hard for me. I don’t feel as old as this flesh makes me look.” She wobbles her thighs—dotted with age spots—as if to confirm for me that she really is so undesirable.

I think she is beautiful. As beautiful as ever she has been.

Tessa Meyer Santiago is a creative writer and a daughter, a wife, and a mother of three. This essay won first place in the 1997 BYU Studies Personal Essay Contest.

NOTES

¹Lowell L. Bennion, *How Can I Help? Final Selections by the Legendary Writer, Teacher, and Humanitarian* (Murray, Utah: Aspen Books, 1996), 91.

²Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1974), 1.

³Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966–73), 3:578.