

Being Mom

By P.G. Forte



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INTRODUCTION

All of these poems (with the exception of the last one, Birthright, which was written several years earlier) were written between 1997 and 1999 when I was living in Berkeley and...being a mom.

A year later, I would begin writing novels on a more-or-less full-time basis. The family has yet to recover.

I'm living in Berkeley again, after an absence of several years, and the 'children' are now in their mid-to-late teens. Life is different in some ways, not so different in others. Still, it's been fun for me to look back at this stage in our lives.

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THE CAT'S MOTHER

I could have been this obsessed, I think. It's certainly a point of view I understand intimately. My daughter has spent a considerable amount of time trying to identify the person I'm describing in this poem. Should I tell her the truth? It's all of us, at times.

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BEING MOM

The cassette tape of 'songs about fish' was real. I could tell you where I got it, but I think I would be doing a disservice to the recording artist if I did.

I remember those Friday nights though. They might have been my least favorite thing about that time.

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GIVING BIRTH TO FISH

This was written for my son, a Pisces. Hence the fish in the title. But, trying to hold onto any of them is like trying to catch fish with your bare hands. Anyway, in the end, letting go is part of the job description.

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SUNDAY AFTERNOON/PUBLIC SWIM TIME

It took being a mom to make me realize that boys and girls *are* different. Berkeley is very big on the concept of 'celebrating diversity' but, in reality, Gender differences are rarely applauded.

This poem is an attempt to celebrate those differences that are innate in each of us. Because, like it or not, we are what we are.

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GIRL AT THE POOL

Same pool, different day. This is another poem where my daughter was curious about the identity of the main character. It wasn't about her—she got that part right. She was one of the impatient friends holding hands and shivering, urging their friend to hurry.

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MORNING IN BERKELEY

Can you tell we're a family of mostly night owls? 'Chelsea, wake up!' was a daily refrain. Thankfully, that's in the past...at least for now. Trust a Taurus to find a way to get what she wants. In this case, to sleep in.

The last verse reflects my growing exhaustion with the endless political battles that rage here. Don't get me wrong, I think 'being involved' is a wonderful thing. But you can burn out fast in a place like this.

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LITTLE LEAGUE LAMENT Parts One and Two

I 'cannibalized' this poem in part for one of my novels—A Taste of Honey. I lent my point of view on this subject to Lucy.

My brother, who really does love baseball, has made the point that Little League is not synonymous with Baseball. I concede the point.

For a while, my son lived for baseball. Now...it's skateboarding. Ah, well, at least he doesn't make me watch as he hurls himself down flights of stairs.

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TWO SONNETS FOR CHELSEA AT AGE SIX

I still remember a friend of mine, the mother of another six year old girl, coming up to me one day. She was clutching a book in her hand as if it was her only link to sanity. Relief radiated from her. She'd just learned that her daughter's inexplicable behavior was exactly to be expected from a six year old girl.

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BIRTHRIGHT

This was written as an ode to the male obstetrician who presided over my daughter's birth. We were never in sync. I suppose I should have seen the writing on the wall at my very first pre-natal visit. The nurse who weighed me in insisted that I was there for my post-natal check up. Insisted! The relationship went downhill from there.

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THE CAT'S MOTHER

She doesn't want to put her children on a pedestal.
She did once: a pillar surmounted by a fishbowl
in which her child could float,
while she, and the entire world, revolved around it.

She just wants to keep them safe.
The world is so dangerous, and they are so dear.
She can't really protect them from everything,
but still...she can't help trying.

She doesn't think her kids are perfect.
But she won't listen to complaints,
real or imaginary, spoken or implied, deserved or not.
She feels as culpable for their faults, as for her own.

She wishes that she could turn herself invisible.
Or microscopic. Or adhesive. Or all three.
So that she could follow her children around undetected.
So she could crawl inside their heads and find out what they're thinking.

She doesn't want to stop them making friends.
It's just...the friends they make so rarely meet her standards.
It's not that she dislikes all other kids,
it's just...she's infinitely more fond of her own.

She had gotten used to being indispensable.
To being quite the center of her children's world.
That feeling comes now, less and less.
She is having to get used to being...useless.

She doesn't understand it when they pull away,
or show poor judgement, when they won't take her advice.
She studied all the literature, she just never really thought it would apply.
To them. To her.

She used to carry them inside her, cognizant of every move they'd make.
Now, like some great, sightless, cave creature,
she stumbles in the dark,
searching after something precious she's misplaced.

BEING MOM

Being Mom means:

The CHOCOLATE your daughter put in your bag — for safekeeping ,
and the SPORTS BOTTLE your son was too tired to carry,
have had an unfortunate encounter involving
your checkbook,
a small feather,
a new roll of stamps,
and a cassette tape of songs about fish.

All of which you discover ONLY
when you take out your wallet
and attempt to pay for dinner — which,
if you still assume a meal
at which everyone eats the same food,
at the same time,
can only mean PIZZA.

Being Mom means:

Friday nights, which you used to LOOK FORWARD TO,
used to enjoy,
SEEM TO REMEMBER spending: at the movies,
or with a glass of wine and a good book,
in a smoky bar, out with friends, dancing,
OR EVEN
snuggling up in bed with your husband.

Are now filled with:

DRIVING packs of mostly strangers back and forth across town
NOISE. Loud. Repetitive. Mostly unpleasant. Definitely NOT music.
AND CONFUSION (for which read lies)
generated by the aforementioned strangers regarding
where they are supposed to have gone.
And with whom.

Being Mom means:

the phone has now become the LIFELINE
which you use to call THE OTHER MOMS to ask
if they have seen your kids
or might have heard
where they are supposed to have gone.
And with whom.

Being Mom means:
Meeting the new principal
(under EXACTLY those sets of circumstances
you would most like NOT to be
meeting the new principal!)
And embracing the role of child advocate
at EXACTLY the moment when
you're most furious with said child.

Being Mom means:
You're the person they depend on to keep things safe,
to always remember what they will or won't eat,
to pick them up and drop them off,
to be the voice on the other end of the phone when they call
and to -- somehow -- track them down when they don't,
to be on their side when there's trouble,
to forgive, and forgive, and forgive them,
and to LOVE.

GIVING BIRTH TO FISH

You. So hardheaded, impatient,
push and push your way to freedom.
And I — exhausted by the struggle —
am everything that's standing in your way.

As you: Unyielding, relentless, unstoppable,
are suddenly here
In a mad, wild, slippery rush
and gone
out into the world.

Too quick for good-byes. Too late to pull you back.
Elusive as a fish. Freed from my line with one swift cut —
we both emerge whole.

Giving birth was easy,
now we flounder, now we're both
exhausted by the struggle.

As you: Still hardheaded, impatient, unyielding,
push your way to freedom once again,
And still, I
am everything that's standing in your way.

This time, it is our hearts
that ache and stretch and tear with all your efforts
to grow up, to grow away: To give birth to yourself
and go
In a mad, wild, slippery rush
out into the dark, uncharted depths of the future.

Too quick for good-byes. Too late to pull you back.
My nets, like my embraces —
all are empty.

A beautiful sight
Sunlight shimmers on the Bay
Good-bye little fish

SUNDAY AFTERNOON/PUBLIC SWIM TIME

Boys at the pool crash through sparkling water, push each other under,
come up splutteringsplashing, water dripping from their long, long lashes.
Teeth flashing giant smiles, they toss, or try to toss, each other
through the air. Then push each other under, once again.

Water is the perfect medium in which to play
adding grace and speed and power to their movements.
They immerse themselves entirely without ever losing sight
of who they are, or where the water ends and they begin.

Girls at the pool — at play — they bob and sway. They weave
their way through intricate dances, set to music only they can hear.
They pause. Engage in conversation. Bask in mutual admiration.
Exchange encoded messages bubbled in each other's ears.

They float. They leap and dive. They look like large enchanted flowers,
like rainbow painted porpoises at play.
In this turquoise-colored, sunscreen-scented, chlorinated otherworld
they are set free.

Now the boys: a roiling, rollicking mass, lurch through the pool
like a piston driven steam engine gone wild
arms and legs churn the water, waves erupt around them
pushing everything out of their path.

Girls scatter like a flock of birds.
Some—bursting into tears—emit small, wounded cries.
Some shrieking in mock terror while joy sparkles in their eyes.
Frowns crease the flower faces: They dare not approve such rude behavior.

They're still too young to be enchanted by the boys' antics.
The boys, too young to care, too young to charm,
too young to yearn to be entangled
in their floating coils of hair.

Indifferent to the differences that link them.
Their lives as magnets have not yet begun.
For now, the boys recede. The girls resume their labyrinth patterns.
Water ebbs and swells and ripples all around.

On the dancing waves,
time has cast a silver net
to capture them all

GIRL AT THE POOL

Little girl walking.
In a hurry
to catch up with her friends.
In a hurry
to get OUT
of the cool air,
INTO
the warm shower.

Mindful of both
the watchful eye of the adult
who's just told her: "Don't run!"
and the calls of her shivering friends,
standing hunched,
holding hands,
shaking with impatience and cold:
"h-h-h-hurrrrrry up!"

Trying to walk fast.
Trying to not run.
Hurry, hurry, hurry UP.
Her feet skip steps,
take little , involuntary ,
leaps.
If she could,
she would fly.

MORNING IN BERKELEY

Chelsea wake up!
The roosters are crowing.
The chicklings you hatched just a year ago,
now are full grown .
crimson crested,
proud in their plumage,
in full throat they greet the new day.

Chelsea wake up!
The fog which only last evening,
descended like heavy, gray wool
has just risen:
A curtain gone up on another new day.
The hills are a stage set, the next act
already begun.

Chelsea wake up!
The air is so crowded
with news from the Bay:
A tang of salt flats, a squabble of gulls.
An egret sails over our garden
where sweetblooming plum trees
shed their pale petals on the grass.

Chelsea wake up!
The coffee is brewing.
The pencils are sharp,
Committees already have formed!
Agendas need airing, and votes must be taken.
Endless debates will be raging.
It's morning in Berkeley.

LITTLE LEAGUE LAMENT

I

My son plays baseball.
And even though sports are foreign languages to me
(and I have no ear for languages at all)
I am learning baseball by default because
my son plays baseball.
And even though I have a husband
who once played baseball.
And several brothers who have all,
(with varying amounts of grace
and skill
and enthusiasm)
played baseball:
none of them can translate
the simplest phrase into anything
that I can understand.

Not one of them
can comprehend the depths of my frustration
the extremes of outrage and anger
that I feel,
while seated on the bleachers where I watch as
my son plays baseball.
With a grace that leaves me breathless.
With a confidence so rare at eleven, or seven, or nine, OR EVER.
With a concentration that his schoolwork should only know!

My son plays baseball.
And even though I do not play baseball,
do not even like baseball,
do not understand,
nor ever expect to understand,
or like,
or play
The Game ,
Here I am.
On the bleachers again.
Sentenced to another season of pain.

II

Baseball is pain, and pain equals baseball.
It is an equation that leaves no room for joy because:
 There is no joy in baseball.
(There was no joy in Mudville, either
because baseball was played there.)

 There is no joy in baseball.
 Anger? Yes,
 and revulsion.
 But never joy.
 Unless....
 you choose to count as joyous
the savage emotion that rises in my chest
— a great surge , as of batwings,
 flapping ecstatically —
when the umpire is hit by a stray ball.
 Or, better yet, a bat!

 That demented dreamlike state
in which I take note of the coach's car
 and fantasize setting it ablaze?
 The warm feelings excited by
the parents of players on the opposing team
 and occasionally,
by certain parents of certain players
 on our own team?
 Never would I call those joyous!

Nor do I consider a loss of ten runs in a single inning
 to be a thing to take lightly
 or with any degree of pleasure.
Nor do I attribute the long faces and grim
demeanor of a dozen preteen boys
 to an excess of joy.
 Oh, no!
There is no joy in baseball,
 there is only pain.
 And possibly...
 too much testosterone.

TWO SONNETS FOR CHELSEA AT AGE 6

I

All the moods and manners of a woman,
Are encoded in your six-year-old-girl's brain.
And the sorrows, joys and tensions of a lifetime,
Are, for you, in every moment, there contained.
How is it you're not blown apart by anger?
What strength ensures that hearts like your don't break?
When the merest look or word can start you crying,
Aphonic with a passion you can't speak.
You love me and you hate me and you can't care less,
Though you know a dozen ways that I should change.
You hate me and you love me, more than words express.
How is it that I cause you so much pain?
It's no great mystery, if I may be so bold,
That all of your best friends are other six-year-olds!

II

You're Bliss, you're Tenderness, you're Grace Incarnate,
Your beauty is a sight I scarce can bear;
When, fresh from your bath, you sit down beside me,
And scream as I attempt to comb your hair.
Someday I know this too will be behind us,
Someday you will emerge out of this dream,
Someday you will call off this childish conflict,
Someday ...perhaps when you are seventeen?
Now we struggle through this lengthy transformation,
As, like a butterfly, you shift and re-define,
Using all the power of imagination,
Your personality to redesign.
Deep within your brain's cells chemicals combine,
I scramble over eggshells, to avoid your heart's landmines.

BIRTHRIGHT

Wrong from the start —
the fit between us never made
— you were unclear about
the nature of our partnership.
You were only here at my behest.
An aide. No. Less. A hedge against disaster.

What did you think?
That I would give control to you?
This birth is mine!
Though you might try —
cold steel, cold hands, cold words
— to make it yours.

It comes to this:
I would rather tear myself apart
than cede this right to you.
Thwarted, you can but hold
the life that I deliver
in your hands — a beat too long.

Oh, baby girl,
no matter what they try to tell you,
always remember this:
WE are the process.
We hold creation in our cells.
And never do we give ourselves away.