

BEATON, JILL B., M.F.A. Love, Labor, Skin & Blood. (2021)

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Through photography, film, and personal experience I learn to weave together a self-portrait of the slow, uncomfortable process of shedding my identity to transform into a new identity, Mother. This thesis is a puzzle in which the pieces are laid out across the white walls. The entire picture is still not clear, there is no box with the finished image that I can follow. It is a forever hunting, searching, endlessly analyzing the very need we have to be nurtured, and to nurture. Creating and staging images is the container in which I can collect the puzzle pieces to try and see clearly my new self.

LOVE, LABOR, SKIN & BLOOD

by

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Approved by

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## DEDICATION

*Dedicated to Daniel. Thank you for your love during this journey.*

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I: AN INTRODUCTION

It's 70 degrees outside right now. The sun is on my face, and the breeze smells like dogwood trees. There is a big bumble bee buzzing around my coffee, and the birds are all talking to one another. I'm about to graduate with my Master's in Fine Arts, and I would've never pictured my life as it is right now when I started taking photographs. I can remember driving around with my Mother when I was young, looking out of the window, watching the landscape bleed together, and I would imagine a whole new world. I remember thinking about running. I would imagine myself running as fast as the car was driving and the landscape collapsing around me as I ran by the moving vehicle.

When I was in elementary school, the school gave me a disposable camera, and it felt like I could hold my whole world in my hands. I could make the ephemeral tangible through the 35mm negatives. I continued photographing throughout high school and then moved to San Francisco to go to college for photography. I thought my imagination might not be enough anymore, my anxiety grew more profound, and I started drinking heavily. I drank to not feel scared about what was driving me to create art. I drank because I was afraid of my thoughts. I drank because I was embarrassed, and I drank because I was broken. I could only speak about my pain through images, and that was suffocating. I took a self-portrait for one of my classes my freshman year of myself staring blankly into the camera. Half of my face appeared to be covered in bruises, and the other half had beautiful makeup on. I created the bruises myself with dark eyeshadow. I remember sharing the image with the class and having conversations about the glitter in the eyeshadow being distracting, how the image was overexposed, and ways I could expand on the concept. My emotions were so dissolved into the picture that I could sit and critique this painful image I had created of myself, of this eighteen-year-old young woman, who in real life was being abused by her boyfriend.

Real-life, real pain, real fear, absolute hopelessness all composed into a piece of fiction open to critique. I continue to take self-portraits today.

After graduating, I moved to New York City to become a fashion photographer. I wanted to take images of celebrities and models in avant-garde dresses in run-down warehouses. I wanted to be seen and thought of as talented and a "great" photographer. I was still drinking and not taking any photographs. I worked for other photographers and photographers' agencies. I lugged camera equipment in the snow from Manhattan to Brooklyn and also grabbed lunch for the crew, all for free. I was so numb to the mess of my life that the only thing I thought drinking was ruining was my time to take photographs. After falling asleep on the street near my apartment and waking up in the hospital, I finally began working towards being sober. I sat in dark basements in old churches with men in their 50s, trying to learn how not to let my life slip away from me. Not being able to drink was a complete shock to my system, and I needed to find a way to transfer my addiction to something else. The only thing that I felt would work was taking photographs. I explored self-portraits again through a series titled "Strange Women." I was obsessed with creating images of myself while getting sober. I played out my fears and anxiety, stress, loneliness, hopelessness, hopefulness all through those 35mm negatives.

I built a portfolio by funding my editorial projects, and I eventually started doing editorial photography for magazines and fashion companies. I was also still photographing "Strange Women" and getting some of those images into art exhibitions. I was now married and living in Los Angeles and had been sober for a few years. I got pregnant in the summer of 2016. I was at the mall with my friend when I got the call from the doctor. I was so happy. My husband was so happy. We were nervous about a lot—like living in a studio apartment in an absurdly expensive city—but we would figure it out. When I was a few months pregnant, I was invited to be a part of a group show at the Annenberg Space for Photography in Los Angeles. I felt proud.

On November 30th I started having cramps. I went to the emergency room, and they told me that everything was fine and that it was perfectly normal to have some cramping; I was 18 weeks pregnant. The next day my doctor wanted me to come in to check that everything was okay. I remember being so exhausted from being at the emergency room all night and wondering if it was worth it to drive to another doctor. I remember calling my mom, and she said that I should listen to the doctor and start driving. We waited in the waiting room for over thirty minutes. We played on our phones and looked at funny dated parenting magazines when we heard them calling our names. They told me to undress and put on a hospital gown. I remember sighing deeply, and I slowly pulled off my sweatshirt with my pajamas underneath while thinking about where we should pick up lunch. I laid on the cold table as the doctor checked my cervix.

I was excited to hear the heartbeat again. I closed my eyes while I listened. The room was so quiet, and I opened my eyes to see my doctor's face—he was cold and direct—“we need to get you into surgery; your water bag is slipping out of your cervix.” I couldn't comprehend what that even meant. My cervix was opening, and I was going into labor without any pain. I got into a wheelchair, and they said not to stand up. I was carried onto a hospital bed and had a catheter inserted. The doctor said he would try to do everything he could, but it was not looking good. They wheeled me back to surgery, and as I was about to be put to sleep, I realized that when I woke up I would know if my baby was okay. The nurse must have seen the fear in my eyes; she stroked my head and held my hand. I started to cry; I wanted just a few more minutes of my baby in my belly before I had to close my eyes.

“It will be okay; you are okay, it will be okay” she said as my eyes closed.



I woke up in a strange panic. I almost forgot where I was or what had happened. I was too afraid to touch my stomach.

I spent the last five and half months of my pregnancy lying in bed; I could not stand up because my cervix was stitched shut. I laid horizontal day after day, watching my stomach grow bigger; I became a vessel, cocooned within myself until he was ready to be released.

William was born on April 1st, 2017, at 11:57 am. He was exactly one month early, but he was strong and ready for life. We had made it together, and I was ready for life too.

## CHAPTER II: PLAYING MOTHER

The first months with William were exhausting and exhilarating. I remember sitting in the bathtub crying the day we brought him home. The blood is still streaming from the incision, creating a light pink stream in the water. I missed him in my stomach, and I missed myself before the bed rest. The demands of this new beautiful baby felt wholly overwhelming and sudden after not being able to even walk for the past months. *How do I move through these two extremes?* My husband worked at a demanding job, and I was left at home with William until late at night. Just the two of us trying to adjust to the new world we were both in. I felt alone and isolated, not sure of how to act and what to do at times. Before his birth, I had thought so much about the image of the Mother I would be, and it didn't fit into place as it should. I was isolated and sad. I felt like I was missing something; I was stranded and unsure. I was exhausted and terrified.

In a moment of helplessness, I found a postpartum depression support group close to my home, packed up William, and headed over to the meeting. I remember the first meeting I went to when I was getting sober, I had numbness surrounding my pain. Not embarrassed or afraid but tired and reaching for anyone, knowing I couldn't do this alone. The women's voices sounded like mine; they all spoke candidly through shaking voices about their struggles and fears. They all knew of the chaotic energy of bringing a new life into the world and the strength mothers are expected to possess effortlessly, leaving most feeling not up to such standards. We all had visions of how we would be. We want to look like our mothers in those snapshots of our childhood, embracing our child with a smile and warmth, our true identity. I imagined myself becoming whole.

When I look at images of my Mother, all I see is a Mother. When I looked at myself, I saw a mirage of a mother; I couldn't entirely trust the reflection. Our western culture often places pre-made constructs onto individuals and their role within the society like a

board game—will you play the Good Mother or the Bad Mother? Our media reflects this, not only in our family archives but in our films and television shows. We present the complex ideas of being a mother and mothering within these media platforms as a template for how our reality should look. The template that is utilized is constructed using archives and memory of subjugated women.

The photograph *Playing Mother* (Figure 1) is fragmented into three panels positioned in a row creating the whole image the further you stand from the work. The colors are deep and dark, and the image is slightly underexposed, creating an unrealistic depiction of what the light was like in reality. A woman hunches over in a deep red dress holding back a small child from a burning fire several feet away—more than a safe distance. The embrace of the child is soft and non-urgent. The small child looks towards the camera with knowledge of the scene's construction while the woman stares directly at the child entirely in the character of Mother. The light shines down on the grass, creating a barrier between the fire and the two figures acting as a threshold between safety and danger. The dramatics of the scene fuel the cinematic nature of the image, creating a strange, ominous tension. There is no beginning and no end to the drama unfolding before the viewer. The stillness within the Mother's attempt to protect the small child reveals the terrifying nature of our identities within the constructed roles of society perpetuated by the media.

How do we begin to dismantle our ideas of what we should be, who we should be, how we should be as mothers when the constructed images of what came before will seep through our subconscious and taint the creation of ourselves? We can't live up to something that is make-believe, so we continue to try and outrun the emptiness by acting out the lives we were told we should live, realizing that what we are searching for was a mirage all along. Roland Barthes speaks of “distanciation” in cinema in which the spectator is freed from the grasp of the spectacle within the “epic scene, tableau, the “shot” all of which are working against “mimesis.” In creating *Playing Mother* I am

curious of the “distanciation” I could have to my own ideas of what the representation of Mother could be by creating the spectacle myself.

### CHAPTER III: PARTS OF A WOMAN, PARTS OF A MOTHER

When I was living in San Francisco I was a nanny to a sweet, intense, fiery girl named Chloe. She was full of energy and emotion—it was all-consuming to watch her at times. I would pick her up in the morning and get her dressed; she insisted on wearing pink glitter shoes, and I didn't feel the need to fight her. We would walk around the dog patch, the industrial but up-and-coming part of San Francisco where she lived, and usually end up at Whole Foods in the morning to get a cup of coffee and to kill some time before one of her classes.

That day I had gotten a cart and decided to do my grocery shopping while we were there. As we were standing in line to check out, she spotted brightly colored plastic bubble jars, and she had been so helpful that I agreed to buy her one. She grabbed a pink jar and put it in the cart as I was checking out. I was about to pay when she grabbed a second jar, a blue one, and said she wanted both colors. I told her that I would only buy one bubble jar, and she needed to choose which one she wanted more. Her eyes filled with tears, and she started to scream, "I WANT BOTH BUBBLE JARS!"

I panicked and tried to calm her down, but I also felt that I needed to stay strong and only buy one. Her little body plopped on the floor and became so limp and heavy that I was truly in shock that I could not pick her off of the floor. The line started forming behind me, and the cashier was beginning to get impatient. I panicked and, with all my strength, I lifted her tiny stone body off of the ground, dodging her limbs as they whiplashed past my head towards the exit. My heart was beating so fast, and my eyes were swelling. I felt alone and visible all at once.

I got her outside, still screaming, and sat on the bus bench as I held her in my arms. My tears became heavier, and Chloe could start to hear my cries when she looked up at me

and said, "what's wrong?" Before this moment, I don't think I realized what caring for a child looked like or felt like, what true patience was, what actual exhaustion would be, what extreme forgiveness could be. I thought about my experiences with Chloe a lot during my bedrest, feeling confident that they had prepared me to handle all of the obstacles of motherhood.

When my husband left me at home alone with William for the first time, I remember feeling that it might not be safe. *Can I watch this tiny baby by myself? What if something happens?* It's a strange thing to feel unsure of your ability in mothering while holding the baby you carried with you for so long, this extension of your body. What I did not realize is that nothing can quite prepare you for that moment, holding your child and knowing that their entire selves depend on you. You are the world and can shape and shift and create it for them. On that day of Chloe's tantrum, I was able to take her home and then leave for my own home. I remember listening to music on my long bus ride and taking a nap. Now, when I held William, I was his home, and he was mine. There was no long bus ride after a big fight in a grocery store to decompress and listen to music. There was no nap; there was just us and me, trying to figure out how to be a mother.

*Parts of a Woman, Parts of a Mother* (Figure 2) is a series of three gelatin silver prints. Each image is a self-portrait in an empty room with floral wallpaper, sheer curtains, and a soft haze engulfing the scene. The wallpaper dominates the pictures, with the repetitive pattern of the flowers seemingly endless. In the first image, a woman lies in the corner of the frame; your eyes focus on the bottoms of her shoes which are the blackest tone in the picture. Her hand is just beyond the gaze of the shoes and appears soft and relaxed, allowing a calmness within the image. The dress is conservative as the hemline falls just beyond the knee. The following image is animated and alive: a woman stands holding her hands to her stomach, her gaze towards her hands and her face is slightly in disbelief. She appears somewhat out of focus, creating tension within the depth of field, tricking our eyes to view the sharp flowers in the wallpaper and having

to adjust to seeing the woman. The dress resembles something that a 1950s housewife would wear. The final image, similar in certain aspects but upon a more careful viewing, is quite different. The woman faces away from the viewer, towards the point where the walls meet. Her hair is shorter than the woman in the previous image; however, her dress remains the same. The images are haunting, the house being an overpowering force around the eerie, awkward posture of the woman.

In his 1919 essay "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freud analyzes the theory of "Heimlich", which he characterizes as an idea of belonging to a house; familiar; domestic but also something concealed, secretive, and impenetrable. Becoming a Mother feels this way, it's the strange sensation of being in your body that is completely known and completely unknown within the same moment. I can look down and see the skin I've always had, the same freckle, hair but it's no longer the old self's body, it's that of a new Mother. As a woman, I never thought twice whether I would know how to be a Mother; I think we tell women that it's always within them to be a Mother, a natural transition from girlhood to motherhood. The stillness of lying-in-bed for five months left me feeling every moment of my body changing as well as my mind. During bed rest, I thought I could use the time to read books, and journal but there wasn't an ounce of myself that I could give to creativity. It was so hard to think about anything besides lying still and making sure my body was straight so that my son could stay safely inside. My body was already mothering this child, my mind was oddly calm, and I understood that what I was doing was just what I needed to do. For the first time in my life, I felt my mind and body truly connected and in tune with one another, working together.

There were moments where I was scared, but that fear felt like my old self, and the new self that was forming was keeping me safe and sure. I was mothering not only my child but myself those five months; I was split in two, the body and mind that had carried me up until this moment was morphing and extracting from within. Both selves were co-existing, and the strangeness of the new self and the familiar self within this identity felt

surreal. However, when William was born, the old self finally detached from the new self and evaporated, leaving me with just the new self, Mother. A familiar identity but still unknown, still uncomfortable, and I needed to mourn my old self; I would never be that person again. That painful realization haunted me like an old memory that I was desperately attached to, like pointing at a photograph and saying, “wow, that used to be me.”



## CHAPTER IV: SHADOWS OF YOU AND ME

I took William to The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles one afternoon when he was a little over a year old. There was an exhibition titled *Real Worlds: Brassai, Arbus, Goldin*, I had seen the images when they were being shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art years earlier; however, the excitement of seeing the photographs in person gave me the courage to drive downtown and face parking with a small child by myself. After going around in circles in downtown Los Angeles, walking in the heat with William anxiously wanting to get out of the stroller, we found ourselves in the museum alone, staring at the photographs. I thought about the title *Real Worlds* and how the idea of "real" is relative to an individual, and each picture was an object from those separate worlds. The photograph was like holding a compression of your real-world in your hands, being able to save a fraction of stillness from the constant living and moving. William was crying "out, out" as I strolled through the gallery trying to take in all the worlds around me. The collision of time in one room, creating new real worlds.

*Shadows of You and Me* (Figure 3) consist of eight Polaroid transfers from a large format camera. The film is fragile and needs to be developed and processed immediately after taking a photograph. The print is made from the negative, which presses up against the paper coated with chemicals. After you take the picture and peel the negative, you are left with an imprint of the negative. The prints are soft, and some photos seem like they are fading in real-time. You can see the chemicals blotched along the edges, and the details are muddled and blended like watercolor bleeding on a canvas. Rosiland Krauss, art critic and theorist, writes "photography's vaunted capture of a moment in time is the seizure and freezing of presence. It is the image of simultaneity, of the way that everything within a given space at a given moment is present to everything else; it is a declaration of the seamless integrity of the real." (Krauss, 23) The presence of the chemical process on the print and fading image that is

left behind distorts the integrity of moment. The shutter can process the real but within that production from light to print the moment becomes filtered. As the moment doubles from capture to negative, it also transforms leaving behind something transcending the real, like blotches of light that appear when you close your eyes.

Teju Cole, the author of "On Photography" a New York Times column, describes photography as a "shadow remaining on the wall after the body has moved on." The moment is fixed and tangible but still fleeting. My son loves to look at our shadows on the sidewalk. "Look it's me and you, Mommy"; he tries to catch our shadows and jump on them, running around in circles chasing our bodies in the light. The photographs are a way to capture our shadows, however fleeting or distorted, and stand in front of our real worlds, a fraction, of stillness, of him and me, when he was four years old on a Sunday in the bright spring sun.

## CHAPTER V: LIFE BALLOON

I remember asking my husband over and over again, *I can't be pregnant, right?* "No, no, you are not pregnant," he would say to calm my fears. I decided to take a pregnancy test a few weeks after my missed period. William was six months old, and we were still getting to know one another. I was still getting to know my new self; we were tired and stretched thin. I think I waited so long to take a pregnancy test because I knew and wasn't ready to think about it.

I texted my friend right after the test came back. "Congratulations," she said. I put the phone down, laid down on my bed and closed my eyes. Feeling my body breathe, listening to my heartbeat, and knowing my body was already working, my mind was already peeling apart, a new metamorphosis started to begin. The doctor had said with each pregnancy, I would need to be on bed rest, my cervix stitched shut until the baby was strong enough to be delivered.

*Could I lay in bed for the entire pregnancy? How would I care for the tiny baby that is here and needs me now?* Going through all the scenarios in my head, overwhelmed with the power to think about life as a choice. My life and the new life that I might create that was just beginning to form. I had given so much, my whole self, for those months in bed, my mind giving way to my body to grow William. I fought so hard for his life, and I felt that I had to now fight for our lives.

I chose to have an abortion, and I was very fortunate to live in California. The power that I have within me wasn't taken away by politics and laws dictating what my body should produce. I sat in the cold doctor's office somewhere in the San Fernando Valley in a 1970's brown building, with old chairs and old photographs of women's bodies, thinking of all the women who had come before me, who sat where I was sitting.

Scared, full of guilt, shame, uncertainty, and a quiet strength. Julia Kristeva says, “that word fear — a fluid haze, an elusive clamminess-no sooner has it cropped up then it shades off like a mirage and permeates all words of the language with nonexistence, with hallucinatory, ghostly, glimmer.” (Kristeva, 6) *Life Balloon* (Figure 4) is a 4x4 instant Polaroid. The polaroid itself is something from a hallucination. It’s a collage of memories that are shrouded in the ghostly fear of remembering sitting in the doctor's office. The image is reddish orange, the colors mimicking pictures of fetuses. A reflection of a house and tree floats in the background, and the middle is a hand holding a red balloon. The image is surrounded by a large mat that feels like it's concealing and revealing the image underneath. A whole life in the image, a peek into the ghostly universe in which I am the matriarch. I am again transforming into a new self, and with no other child being born from me, only a Mother. A powerful Mother.

## CHAPTER VI: FROZEN BODIES

Defining Mother is difficult, not because of how much it encompasses but because of how significant the mind's physiological transformation is to the creation of the identity of a Mother. We use the term Mother; we think of our Mother and all that is attached to our relationship or lack of connection. We also think of Mother in the broader sense of a particular type of caring and love. When I use the word Mother, I am speaking about the transmutation that one's identity goes through while creating life. The relationship to giving life does not define the word; it is only the catalyst to which begins the transmuting of the self from one identity to that of Mother. The abjection of the child at birth is the beginning of the construction of the child's identity.

In contrast, the Mother is forming through the mind's physiological response to her body beginning to create life. The mind is changed within the self, regardless of that life reaching the world.

The film *Pieces of a Woman* (2020), written by Kata Weber, is a painful look at a mother who loses her child during labor. The beginning of the movie begins with Martha (the main character) in her home as she prepares for a home birth with her husband and midwife. The scene starts slowly; Martha walks around the kitchen and living room rubbing her back, her head down, breathing through the off and on pain of contractions. After about ten minutes of the labor progressing, we realize something is not correct, and the baby is in danger. We hold our breath as we watch the midwife try to help Martha save the baby. In the last moments of the scene, we experience all the joy and pain of life with Martha as her baby dies within minutes after birth. The film then cuts to a few months later, and we watch Martha learn to live in this new world, as a new person, while navigating grief. There is a small scene halfway through the film where Martha is shopping and sees a little girl in the store. Martha stares at her lovingly and

with such care before the little girl walks away with her Mother. First, I viewed the child as representing grief that Martha is carrying with her, but now, I feel the child is not a representation of suffering but a reminder to the audience that she will always be a Mother with or without a child.

*Frozen Bodies* (Figure 5) is a series of four photographs. The first photograph is of a hill, snow covers the top portion of the hill, and you can see the snow has started to melt away towards the bottom half. The sky is bright blue but hiding behind a flat sheet of clouds. In the following image, a body appears in a bright red dress lying in the fetal position in the middle of the hill perpendicular to the ground. The clouds are beginning to open, and the blue sky appears in the corners of the image. In the third image, the body remains in the same place on the hill but is nude; the red dress lies at the bottom of the hill where the snow is showing that it has melted. The clouds have opened towards the top of the image to let more sky through. The final image is the same hill now without the body, but in its place, an indent of the body along with hand and foot marks showing a struggle has taken place. The clouds have now darkened, and the blue sky has left; the image looks like it was photographed at a completely different time or on a different day. The photos together suggest the slow, painful, excessively uncomfortable, and vulnerable transformation the mind endures while becoming a Mother. The body in the images is mine, and someone asked if these images would be considered self-portraits. While creating the photos, my reaction was, "no, this is just a body reflecting something happening within the mind," but now I do see them as self-portraits. Not the body, although it is mine; I don't believe self-portrait needs to be defined by the body represented but in the mind in which is creating the new world. Myself becoming a Mother is all that I truly know and can speak for, and it is only one real-world amongst many. These images are my self-portrait, of the real world inside my mind, of the transformation of self to Mother.

## CHAPTER VII: RED ROOM

I've always been obsessed with saving photographs, my husband's photographs, and family photographs; I am the family archivist. I have boxes and boxes of pictures that I carry with me along with each move I make. When I was in third grade, my home burned down. Thankfully, no one was in the house at the time, but we lost almost everything. I remember we stayed at a friend's house, and the neighbors brought over old clothes and toys, things to get by. I have a hard time remembering the feelings that I had during that time.

I blocked a lot of those memories out, but the one that remains is my Mother crying that we had lost all our photographs. All the photographs of me as a baby, the baby books my Mother made with keepsakes, all of them were now ashes. The only photographs we have of me as a child are ones that my Mother sent my grandmother. I imagine all of those negatives burning, slowly catching fire, the film strip bending and morphing as holes start to appear through it like stars until the spots open so vast and it all evaporates into the air. Thinking of each frame burning reminds me of a black hole, each tiny moment being sucked into invisibility, never to escape. My Mother never took photographs after the fire, which gave me the obsession to capture everything and save everything. I wanted to archive all of the moments, keep all of the negatives as objects, and hold that time in my hands, not let them get sucked into invisibility. Many of the images that I took seem like documentation, wanting to make sure things are remembered.

Photographs of the way my room looked, pictures of the kitchen, my hands, the bathroom, food, my brother napping. Looking back at all the boxes of images, I was desperately trying not to forget anything. When my Mother's images were destroyed, somehow, those memories would never be the same and would be unreachable without the photograph to help us remember.

*Red Room* (Figure 6) is a large photograph of a small room wholly painted red, although you might not realize that the room is painted red when first viewing the image. A chair sits in one corner. There is a frame above the chair, and a small fan faces the chair. There is a standing lamp and a book stand; in between the light and the chair is a large circular window looking out at trees, and on the floor, there is a circular rug mimicking the window. Staring at the image can be disorienting as the bright red room demands the viewer's attention, but your eyes keep returning to the natural landscape through the window.

Photographs of our lives are just fragmented slices of constructed memory; we hold them close because it is a way to have time closer. Without a photograph, memories can feel so far away. A photograph can give significance to a memory, importance, and sentimental connection to the time passed. The documentation becomes covered in what we want to remember, what we imagine the memory to be. The life within that memory is not reality but what keeps us returning to re-remember is the reality grounded within the documentation.

This light touched the film and imprinted a reflection of the life you were living. I think about the photographs I've taken of William. Most of them are on my iPhone, and I love looking at them, small seconds of love captured in an instant, but the photographs are constantly changing, morphing, and reshaping as time moves forward. They are whatever I want them to be when I look at them; the memory I pick changes from each time I see the image, a collision of imagination and memory with which we filter our lives.

The *Red Room* is the slow construction of space covered in a blanket of imagined memory and compressed into documentation. Another photograph to add to the archive.



## Addendum

The actual red room, the tangible life form that I constructed for the photograph, I burned down. All that is left is ashes; it's been sucked into invisibility. What is left is the memory and the picture.

## CHAPTER VIII: IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

*It's All in Your Head* (Figure 7) is a two-panel projected video. On one side of the video, you see a woman in a red dress in a home going about her daily routine. There is a sign of a child, but the viewer cannot see the child. The video is slow and quiet, moving from space to space within the home. The second video is foreboding with a nude body standing in an ice-covered landscape as the camera slowly inches toward the back of her head. Quick cuts are random and sometimes happen within the blink of an eye. Landscapes are still and isolated mixed with the sounds of a car driving are interwoven with the woman in the red dress running through a snowfield, barefoot, seemingly to nowhere but from something. The video's last scene is a small child, running in the bright sun and green grass, happy and full of life.

In his poem *Taking My Children to the Movies*, poet Philip Dacey imagines sitting in a theatre with his children:

Something large enough to be our mother  
embraces us with light, shadow, and sound,  
making us one, though we sit in our separate seats. (23)

I imagine myself and William, watching my projected worlds, the light moving across our faces, ourselves staring in a dream.

## EPILOGUE

I'm about to finish writing for the day and pick my son up for t-ball practice. We will come home and have dinner, and I'll have to bathe him because he loves to play in the soft sand on the baseball field. He'll ask many questions and probably throw a fit about how he wants to sleep in "mommy's bed" and not his bed. I'll be tired; I am tired.

He'll give me a big wet kiss, and I'll be able to smell the shampoo in his hair and touch his soft skin. If I listen to him breathe, I can bring myself back to when he was just born, and I can close my eyes and be with my fresh baby for a few moments before I'm back in reality with my growing boy. I don't think I can tell you how I'm different and how I am not the same person I was before having William. I can't tell you who I was before my abortion either; those selves are both in a black hole. I do know that I miss them sometimes, especially when the messiness of raising a child can be overwhelming and all-consuming; I try to find her and feel her, but she's already lived her life, and I can't bring her back.

I read once that having a child is like letting your heart walk outside of your body, and before I had a child, I thought that is what it would feel like to be a Mother. Now, I don't think it feels that way. It feels like watching a new heart learn and see and experience the world, a new heart that you want to protect and love, but it's not my heart. He is his own person, he came into this world through me, and I'm forever grateful and honored. Becoming a Mother is like watching your old self burn into the stars, being sucked into the invisible, left in ashes a distant memory. After I get William to sleep, I'll wash my face and get in my bed; I'll miss the good parts of the day, I'll miss the scent of shampoo in his hair, but I'll be grateful to be alone, to breathe deep and be with myself.

Motherhood is different from being a Mother. Motherhood is dinner time, bath time, band aids. Being a Mother is being born again. I'm learning as I grow alongside William; we are two new people chasing the light, trying to grab onto each other's shadows for each of our real worlds before we forget them.

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## CATALOG OF IMAGES

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