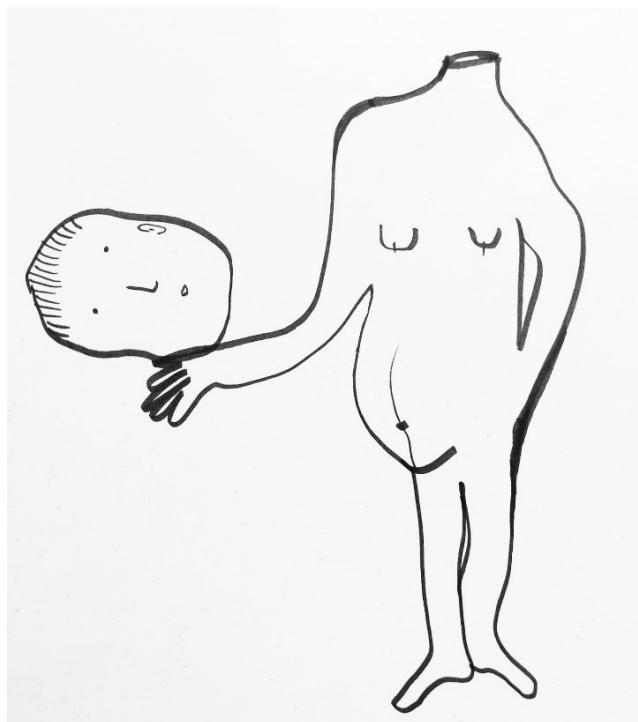


No More Miracles



A Christmas Speech

*by Line Mertens
for and with the Tiny Demolitions Collective
Antwerp, 2023*

Hi

Today
as we approach
the end of another
enumerated year,
as daylight
only has its limited span
and sunlight is scarce,
as gluhwein stands
and Christmas lights
are strung along the streets
and houses
and shopping streets
are blazing with
Christmas hits vol. 3,
while the radio
reports the
enumerated deaths
of the people in Gaza,
still counting,
I would like to talk
about childbirth
and decapitation.

My fellow born
womb carried critter,
this is where we start today.
For, dear listener,
one way or another
you were born.
by which I mean
that
prior to your
first breath of air
you have spent
a months-long period
unfolding inside another body
on which you fed
which became part of you
and by which you were carried.

Now, in your presence
I will start to refuse
some concepts related to birth.

1/ critter: not lofty like a human, but
bound to the world and to mortality
- Donna Haraway

2/ Adrienne Rich

CHAPTER ONE

refusal of Birth as an Origin story

origins do not exist

– a.k.a. your surroundings are part of you.

*Congratulations!
Against all odds
you were conceived.
From a single cell
to a fully grown baby
in just nine months.
Amazing.
You are a miracle.
And so am I.*

This fragment
is the beginning of a documentary
called
Life Before Birth – In the Womb.
It's the intro,
as sketched by National Geographic
available on a YouTube-channel
called *Naked Science*.
While I am generally appreciative
of random nudity
I find this fragment
to be an issue.

3/ Sophie Lewis

You
at your very outset
appear enclosed
from the world around you
which is a hostile place
where you can only arise
against all odds.

There is a tendency
to think ourselves
as separate from our environment,
a capital-letter I
that moves through a world,
which serves as the background
for this big I.

4/ Lisa Doeland

It is only in pushing
this world
to the background,

that our Origins
can become miraculous.
I the Subject
in world the Object
am Amazing from the very start.

For what is to follow
it is crucial
to reject this.

For the sake of
all earth-bound critters,
my friend, let us retell
the story of your birth,
not as a hero against all odds
but as a biological story
involving some nudity.

This is what I understand so far:

Your body, mind and soul,
grew out of material.
this material became you
the form, the content, the flesh
when it was
lodged in a womb
and drew life supplies
from all through
the body it was part of
which itself drew life
from the world it was embedded in.

Your life did not start
on a lone and epic journey.
You were allowed to grow
on the saps of the human
you were part of.
Moreover,
you never did inhabit
a human body
a body would be a stone cold thing
were it not joined to a head.
My god,
you grew out of a full person!
Only becoming you
in the process.

There was no you
preceding this
and even at birth
you were not cut off.

When you came into the world
through a vagina
or cut from a belly,
you were carried
and nursed
and fed
by many hands,
or you would be dead,
as we know
for many have died.

5/ Judith Butler

Let us start
by acknowledging this simple basic stand:
your birth was not a miracle.

In the 1970's
Adrienne Rich wrote a book
titled:
Of Woman Born,
Motherhood as Experience and Institution.
I read it after having born a child
almost 50 years later.

Now 50 years,
is an eternity,
right?
When we are talking about childbirth,
women's rights,
human rights?
And this book
had been written in the United States,
while I am a continent away
full citizen
of Belgium's social-security-paradise,
right?
I was struck
by how much I recognized
of what she had written
and how little I had known.
After 50 years
I could still tie it to
my own experience
of giving birth,
which was one of deep alienation
and loneliness
- in part because
I had no framework
to connect it to.

This is why 50 years later
and an ocean away
I am glad to be able to quote
Adrienne Rich
on finding resources
dealing with this strange phenomenon.

She writes:

In my father's library, I stole glances at the
thick red volume Williams's Obstetrics, a
textbook written by the Obstetrician who
had delivered me. Nowhere was the face of
a laboring mother visible in its photographs;
all was perineum, episiotomy, the nether
parts I recognized as like and unlike my
own, stretched beyond belief by the
crowning infant head.

I find that discourses on childbirth,
and in particular
what counts as knowledge,
is still quite often
dismissive of lived experience.
starting with cutting
the mother's head
out of the picture.

What follows
is the recollection
of my two experiences
of giving birth
during which decapitation
led me to identify with Christ,
that critter of earth
notoriously born on Christmas.

INTERLUDE
on being Christ

My first pregnancy ended
in a last-minute cesarean section
which was
very unsettling and overwhelming.
during this procedure
– which I lived through
as a background,
the object if you will –
I was rolled into a room
with a shiny white ceiling
giving me the exclusive opportunity
to see everything happening to my body
sharply mirrored above me,
even if they had put a sheet
between my head and the rest of my body.
This being the policy
to avoid me from getting too upset.

I hardly think the sight of my own body
is what upset me most at that point,
or that it is necessary
to avoid being upset in this situation,
and I strongly suspect
there was an unacknowledged
aspect of facilitating
the work of the gynecologist
as technician
urgently
and with precision
– the cut was complimented afterwards –
cutting out babies
from their suffocating surroundings.
I imagine it can be unsettling
when these surroundings
have a head.

Failing to make eye contact
or to be involved
with what was happening
I started to study my body
in the shiny ceiling.
Afterwards,
I remembered
having had this thought
that I had looked like Christ in reverse
but I couldn't really recall how that worked.
I just knew that I had thought it
and that this thought
had given me joy in that moment.

Three years later
I was rolled into an operation room,
fully prepared for a C-section
that would deliver
baby number 2000 of the year 2020
Hospital Sint-Augustinus, Antwerp.
The atmosphere was overall jolly
and as I had insisted
to be taken into account this time
there was no sheet
between my head and my body,
only a mouth mask
slightly blocking my view
but hey,
there was a pandemic
and at least there was no sheet.
And people were really nice
so this mask
– it was a minor thing.
In an attempt to connect
to my earlier,
more nightmarish experience
of childbirth,
I was determined to seek out
this Christ-like-image
and remember it sharply.

Here it is:

The outfit of the woman
getting a C-section
is just a hospital gown
which is slid up
so that you lie
bear belly, bear cunt, bear legs,
and red socks
to keep your feet warm

which does disrupt the image.
The gown then functions
like some sort of
badly positioned loincloth.
Your arms are spread for the anesthesia
and really all you can do
to be involved in the whole process
is to look slyly in the direction of your nether parts
giving your head the suffering downward allure
of crucified Christ, only horizontal.

And you are not dying for humanity
you are birthing a human being.

And you are not starved
you are pretty much at your biggest ever.
And you are not wearing a crown of thorns
but a hair net and a mouth mask,
and people did not judge you to death
but are helping you
in the most profound way you can imagine.

But,
like Christ
you have unwillingly
surrendered your body,
and I don't know what to do here
remarking
that I feel closer
to this hanging man on a cross
than to any picture
of Mary
her clean devotion
and invisible labor
an image to me
irreconcilable with –
what – life?

CHAPTER 2

why and how this relates to you

a.k.a. it is a matter of politics, my dear

These matters relate to you
whether or not
you have a uterus
and whether or not
you are planning to use it
for gestational purposes.

Truly, you do you.

My aim here
is to point out
the societal significance
of childbirth
as I feel it is
not often taken into serious consideration.

Take warfare
as the counterexample.

7/ Judith Butler

Warfare is seen
by definition
as a societal issue
– not interpersonal.
Wars bear weight,
and stories.
Wars are what we learn about
in history class.
They are tied up
with how governments rule
and how empires expand or perish
and they are
in all their gruesome stupidity
a matter of politics.
They are a matter of politics
to the absurd level
where bodies are to remain
numbers,
under all circumstances
not human beings
who could be
individually mourned or avenged.
Wars are
topic of important thought.
and in as far as they are

topic of important thought
it is deemed wise
not to think
of the bodily mess they are soaked in.

Childbirth and gestation
while likewise prone to politics
and societal narrative,
while having an enormous
historical and current death toll,
are seen as private matters.
If they do appear as a topic
in history class
it might be in the form
of China's 1 child policy
as an example of faraway cruelty
where politics got too involved
in personal life.
This framing too,
I would like to reject.

Childbirth,
it's when and how,
it's how many and by whom,
the stories of its beauty
the stories of its horror.
All of this is politics.
Childbirth
is foundational
to any form of society.
It is the bodily process
through which life
rambles on
and continues
to produce
imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy
one baby at a time.

8/ bell hooks

That's an uncomfortable frame, right?
I took this phrase
imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy
from bell hooks.
She says
that whenever she calls it out
in full length
it makes her audience laugh.
And, when I read it,
it did make me laugh.

And then, she goes on to ask
why it makes us laugh
when it is an accurate description
of the conditions we live under.
I repeat the sentence here,
because I understand these
are also as the conditions
I live in.

And though we may
like to imagine childbirth
as an apolitical, “natural” realm
– these are the conditions
under which people bear children
– and they work straight up
into the delivery room.

This text is not feminist because of its topic
- as said, childbirth relates to all critters,
but it is feminist in its ethics.
Here is bell hooks again:

To me feminism is not simply a struggle to
end male chauvinism or a movement to
ensure that women will have equal rights
with men; it is a commitment to eradicating
the ideology of domination that permeates
Western culture on various levels —sex,
race, and class

Shit.
I guess what I am talking about
is a manifestation
of this ideology of domination
and how
– through the experience
of childbirth
– it got shook up.

CHAPTER 3

the narratives that haunt us

So let us think for a moment
about narrative.

I would say
that there are two prevailing narratives
enclosing the pathways
to understand birth and gestation
as a matter of public significance,
and they are roughly
the two ways
in which I know people
make sense
of the experience of childbirth.

There is a narrative
that all is nature.
It goes something like this:
like all animals,
women can give birth
– childbirth is beautiful and natural
let us embrace it
and rejoice in our female strength.
This is a narrative that is easy to pick at
in the sense
that it is quite often mocked
even if it has helped people
to find some agency in childbirth.
I am wary of it,
in its connection of the female
to the animal
(or alternatively, to the goddess)
and
in that I fear it to lead
to feelings of failure
when births do not go smoothly.

But this has never been my narrative
and I am not going into it here.
Rather
I would like to take a swing
at a narrative that was my own,
and that is in dire need of some critique.

It goes something like this:

In history
a lot of women
died in pregnancy and childbirth
because health care was bad.
Because so little was known.
Because of stupid superstitions.

Knowledge has increased
with the advent of a Scientific Approach
and child birth is now good and safe,
in as far as countries are rich
and have good health care systems.

This is the framework
I was brought up in.
It was,
in broad lines
what I believed in
when I went into the hospital
to give birth to the first child
that grew in my womb.
It was a narrative that suited
and comforted me.
After all,
I lived
in a rich country
with good health care
– science and doctors
would deliver this child
and I could rest assured
and in truth
I didn't want to be bothered
with the vaguely pink
prenatal yoga-brochures
that made me want to vomit then
and still trigger a sense of revulsion.
I felt belittled
by their yogi-tea
tone of writing
– and, sailing on the confidence
of my privilege,
I didn't even want to look any further.
Thank god!
For of course
I deeply distrusted
the idea that any knowledge or learning
could happen through the body.
It was a time when I thought
I could never learn how to sing.

This narrative,
has turned out,
to be rather stupid.

So I reject it.

First of all,
I refuse
its reduction of history
to a linear narrative
of progress.
While I do not deny
the positive impact
of evidence-based approaches
to childbirth,
there is more to be said.

9/ Adrienne Rich;
Silvia Federici

At the outset
of gynecology
as a legitimate scientific discipline
a lot of women died
in childbirth.
There was no gradual
and linear improvement
but rather a peak in deaths.

Capital S - *Science*
as an area of Men and Heads
excluded female practitioners
from the knowledge it gained.

I do not forget that only
one generation ago
my mother was taught philosophy
by a man who felt and shared that
university is not a woman's place,
after which he addressed
all women dressed in pants
with a denigrating 'meneer', *sir*.

My mother does not tell this story
with pride of having overcome
but still connecting
to shame and humiliation.

It was *Science*
that looked down
on the knowledge and practice
of the women who
had experience with childbirth
by doing and seeing it.

The split in the profession
between midwives and gynecologists
has been 'wasteful and disastrous'
(that's Adrienne Rich again).
Let me quote her very clearly:

The midwives' ignorance of the progress in
medicine and surgery, on the one hand, and
the physicians' ignorance of female
anatomy and techniques relating to
childbirth on the other, were not inevitable.
They were consequences of institutional
misogyny.

This is where the system
that now regulates birth
originates.
And the professors
who taught the gynecologists
practicing today
were taught by
the same generation of professors
who taught
my mother to shut up.

I would argue
that to this day
knowledge of the body
is obscured and ridiculed
– not only in countries far away
but right here,
right now.
There is more than one way
to obscure knowledge,
as the many paths of patriarchy
have often shown us.
Making derogatory remarks
on bodily experience
is one of them.

Try talking about birth pains
as source of strength,
as inspiration for agency
and see whether you are not
immediately shamed
into irrational hippie-hood.

Here is a game
to play at Christmas dinner,
preferably at the point
where most food has been eaten
and people sit heavily around the table
– when catching up
with each other's life is over
and we enter the world of fun facts.
Get everybody
a crayon and a piece of paper
and give a simple assignment.
Draw me a clitoris.
Get beyond the point of scoffing
and of *maar allez*
and say: seriously,
draw me a clitoris.
Reassure them
that a clitoris
can range
– that a sketch
is never reality
so don't worry
just try.
Up until very recently
long after I actively
started to enjoy my clitoris
long after I gave birth to my first child
I could not do this.
Let alone that I knew the size
of my ovaries
or my womb.
And if you play this game,
I wonder what you will get.
Also, make a note
that this is not about
understanding the female body
but the human body.
Out of all human bodies
approximately half
will have a clitoris.

I still associate
the gynecologist's
office with
being shushed
and kept dumb
so as not to be a disturbance.

Our family doctor,
a young woman herself
will not help me out with a spiral
as she does not think it is her job.
Have a specialist
see to your obscure regions.
While giving birth
a training female gynecologist
(who has only just
begun her professional life)
assured me
to my face
not to worry
then went into the hallway
to call her superior
a bit too loud
saying:
things were going bad
could he come right away?
A nurse and a midwife
looked at each other
and went out.
Later on, the midwife came back
and let me hear the child's heartbeat.

CHAPTER FOUR

back to the data

When writing this text
I was looking up maternal mortality rates.
A page is devoted to these numbers
on: *ourworldindata.org*
an open-source website
stating as its mission:

Research and data to make progress against
the world's largest problems.

Its page on maternal mortality
starts with the following sentence:

What could be more tragic than a mother
losing her life in the moment that she is giving
birth to her newborn?

What I hint at
is that there is a common logic
undergirding
my own alienated birth experience
and the expendability of "mothers".

Mothers losing their life
are framed as a tragedy.
I am saying that
this is not what is at stake.
Human beings losing their life
through obscuring bodily knowledge,
is not tragedy.
It is cynicism.

There is a great disparity
when looking at maternal mortality figures.

Ourworldindata goes on
and says in big letters:

If we can make maternal deaths as rare as they
are in the healthiest countries, we can save
almost 300,000 mothers each year.

This is not something
to take in lightly.
I am quite sure
that, depending on
time and place in history
the birth experience
I had –

Well, I would probably have died of it.
And I am quite fond of living.

If we identify
people who die in childbirth
in faraway countries
as tragically lost mothers,
this does not serve
as a means to question
and eradicate domination
on the basis of sex, class and race.
And it is this domination
that makes people
who die in faraway countries
dispensable as bodies.
A strange narrative
of just domination
is reinforced by numbers
– still counting
as scientific support
to a feeling of global
superiority.

If all countries
could be more like ours
– casually ignoring
that our country
like a baby, really,
did not arise in a vacuum
but in close, parasitic relation
to the world.

The logic of domination
that denies a person
giving birth
the right to know
what is happening to them
and to engage with it
is the same logic
that – in its grimmest results
can ignore or dismiss
the dead bodies
of others
in this great tragedy
that is
imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

I would like to fix this.
I would like to solve all of this.

But acknowledging
that I am a critter
I cannot believe in miracles.
This is not a source of despair.
There is hope in this knowledge
as it makes clear
that we are never alone
in making efforts
in telling different stories
against loneliness and alienation.

This text too is not alone.

You can find a link to all references
and collaborators down below.

I am glad to have shared these thoughts with you.

Thank you for reading,
Merry Christmas.

DIALOGUE WITH A CRITTER BORN FROM MY WOMB

Dit is het ziekenhuis waar ik ben geboren. 10/ translation below
Ja, dat klopt.
Vertel nog eens.
Over toen jij geboren bent?
Ja.
Wel, jij zat in mijn buik.
Jij zat daar al lang,
was daar aan het groeien
en toen je groot genoeg was
en sterk genoeg
moest je eruit.
En dan zijn je papa en ik naar hier gekomen.
En dan duurde het heel lang.
Maar je bent eruit gekomen,
nu ja,
de dokters hebben je eruit gehaald.
En je had veel haar en je was heel schattig.
En toen kwamen mami en papi en oma en opa?
Ja, toen kwamen die kijken en er waren dokters en verpleegsters,
heel veel mensen.

En toen was je heel blij dat ik er was.
Ik voelde heel veel.

This text is not a product of great visionary originality.
It is a work of combining and reformulating.
Below, you find the references actively used to build this text.

1/ critter, p. 4: *critter* is a word I first encountered in **Donna Haraway's** *Staying with the trouble*. It comes up already in the introduction: [...] *mortal critters, entwined in the myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings*. Or, as in the footnotes: *critters refers promiscuously to microbes, plants, animals, humans and nonhumans, and sometimes even to machines*. I would suggest *beestje* as its translation in Dutch

2/ **Adrienne Rich**, *Of Woman Born, Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the most referenced work in this text. I took and adapted from the foreword: *The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman's body*. I much enjoyed the image of this unfolding, cutting out woman as I felt it made the sentence unnecessarily conforming to an outdated gender-binary.

3/ **Sophie Lewis**, *Feminism against Family, Full Surrogacy Now*. Both the documentary fragment and the refusal of miraculous growth autonomy are taken from this book, which has been very inspiring and thought-provoking. You can find the original reference at the outset of chapter 3, *The World's Oldest Profession*.

The title of this speech too was directly inspired by this book, which also provides a lot of clear information about the physical process of gestation, starting its Introduction with the glorious sentence: *It is a wonder we let fetuses inside us*. Now, other than what the title and this sentence might suggest, I find its ethics and politics heartwarming, and generous, advocating for another kind of kinship: *The fabric of the 'social' is something we ultimately weave by taking up where gestation left off, encountering one another as the strangers we always are, adopting one another skin-to-skin, forming loving and abusive attachments, and striving at comradeship*. (from the introduction of *Feminism against Family*).

4/ **Lisa Doeland**, *Apocalypsofie*. This book too has been a great source of inspiration in writing this. of the concepts foreground/background, relating to human/earth can be found in chapter 3: *De vele stemmen van Gaia*.

5/ **Judith Butler**, *Frames of War*, introduction: *Precarious Life, Grievable Life*
On p. 14: *It is not that we are born and later become precarious, but rather that precariousness is coextensive with birth itself (birth is, by definition, precarious), which means that it matters whether or not this infant being survives, and that its survival is dependent on what we might call a social network of hands*.

6/ **Adrienne Rich**, same book, chapter VII, *Alienated Labor*.

7/ **Judith Butler**, *Frames of War*, introduction: *Precarious Life, Grievable Life*,
Butler describes frames and how they may be troubled by "*something that does not conform to our established understanding of things*." It is not that there is no bodily account of war – the testimonies and photographs obviously exist, but war terminology/strategy/politics and testimonies from warzones are often at odds. In the intro I spoke of Gaza (which is not strictly a war, but a genocide in occupied territory). There is a conflict between the images and testimonies we have of people in Gaza and words like 'measured response' and 'proportionality', which seem to operate in separate realms, even if they are printed on consecutive pages in the newspaper.

8/ **bell hooks**, *The Will to Change*, chapter 2: *Understanding Patriarchy*.
Often in my lectures when I use the phrase "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" to describe our nation's political system, audiences laugh. No one has ever explained why accurately naming this system is funny. The laughter is itself a weapon of patriarchal terrorism. It functions as a disclaimer, discounting the significance of what is being named. It suggests that the words themselves are problematic and not the system they describe. I interpret this laughter as the audience's way of showing discomfort with being asked to ally themselves with an antipatriarchal disobedient critique. This laughter reminds me that if I dare to challenge patriarchy openly, I risk not being taken seriously

The later given definition of feminism is from *Ain't I a Woman*

9/ **Adrienne Rich**, same book, chapter 6 *Hands of Flesh, Hands of Iron*, describes the history of this separation of the profession between 'midwives and obstetricians'.

Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*. Though not directly referenced here, its reading has informed my understanding of the situation as a construct rather than a "natural" evolution. I think especially of the chapter titled: *The Accumulation of Labor and the Degradation of Women: Constructing "Difference" in the "Transition to Capitalism"*. – Great use of quotation marks in this title.

10/ This is the hospital where I was born.
Yes, it is.
Tell me again.
About when you were born?
Yes.
Well, you were in my belly.
You had been there for a long time,
you had been growing.
and when you were big enough
and strong enough
you had to get out.
And then, your dad and I came here.
And it took a long time.
But you came out,
well, doctors got you out.
And you had a lot of hair
you were very cute.
And then, mami and papi came
and oma and opa?
Yes, they came to see you
and there were doctors and nurses,
a lot of people.
And then you were very happy?
And then I really felt a lot.

Colophon

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editing: Bastiaan Malcorps and Enrica Camporesi

illustrations and object-design: Enrica Camporesi

childcare: Belgian public school system, Josie Jonkergouw and Heidi Vermuyten.

This text was written as a speech.

You can listen to it here:

<https://soundcloud.com/tiny-demolitions>.



This text is part of an ongoing project, a series called *Tiny Demolitions*. *Tiny Demolitions* materializes through the joint efforts of Line Mertens, Enrica Camporesi and Linde De Nijs.

