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Dissertation Distress

A Room of One's Own With a Crib and a Computer

I sit at my computer, typing away, trying desperately to come up with good, solid lines and unique metaphors for an article that I'm working on, while my toddler sleeps soundly in the bed in the same room, which is also the office. I am afraid that with every click of my keyboard I might awaken her. My eyelids are heavy in need of sleep too, but I can't afford to nap. Once Emily wakes up, I will not have any time to myself. We are tired from a restless night with nightmares filled with a loss of Mommy to business trips, not of the traditional monsters under the bed. Now with me, home from my teaching job at a community college, I watch her as she sucks away earnestly on her Binky, content that Mommy is where she should be. I have about one hour and fifteen minutes, give or take, to eek away at my latest short story.

When my two-year old daughter, Emily, is awake, even checking e-mail is difficult. She climbs up on my lap or wedges herself into the back of my office chair, claiming to give me a neck massage in between "peek-a-boo," her real game. When that doesn't work, she bounces on her bed and makes another play for my attention.

"Mommy, let's be dinosaurs on the floor! Come on, Duckie (a dinosaur in *Land Before Time*, a series of children's videos)! I'm Little Foot," she pleads.

"In a minute, Em," I tell her. "Give Mommy ten minutes and we'll play."

That seems to placate her temporarily, knowing that Mommy makes good on her promises. Even so, I feel guilt for my self-indulgence and for my neglect of my daughter, even if it is for ten minutes.

Virginia Woolf never had to contend with children who vied for her attention. Having a child was certainly my choice, but Woolf was only partially right when she determined that women writers needed a room of their own and 500 British pounds to write. Writing mothers also need time and freedom from

guilt for that time away from our children. Woolf was never a mother; she probably couldn't have guessed about the amount of guilt, even with her great insight into the human mind. I say that from experience.

Even a writer like Kate Chopin, with her six children, created a character like Edna Pontellier, an artist-mother who had no guilt over mothering. Edna was the feminist ideal, perhaps, a woman-artist who would never sacrifice her artistic vision or herself. Rather than risk becoming less than she could be, she commits suicide. But Chopin had lots of help with her children. I suspect that she was able to write because of this and wrote almost only short stories because she could do it in short spurts. She rarely revised. I doubt she had time. So while she "watched" her children being tended to by nursery maids, she wrote and satisfied her artistic urges unlike her character Edna. However, there are plenty of real-life, artist-mothers like Edna who exited life by their own hands. The literary world seems peppered with such real tragic heroines—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton—who were all mothers and who gave up on life and motherhood. Still, there are those of us who write without such personal drama. Mother-writers like Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, and Louise Erdrich give me hope that I can have a sane life that includes writing and children. However, despite my best efforts, I do have guilt, lots of it. Feminism isn't easy.

For years, though, I had convinced myself that feminism was easy where motherhood was concerned. Feminism was supposed to be about choices. Some women chose to stay at home with their children and some chose to continue working. Secretly, I suspected that the women who stayed home did so because they weren't really feminists. They stayed at home out of a duty to an outmoded, patriarchal system in which women belonged in the kitchen and in the nursery. I also thought that those women were less intellectually driven than I was. Surely after a maternity leave, I would be dying to head back to work for adult conversation and intellectual challenge. I decided all this before I had the baby. I would go back to work after about a five-month maternity leave. And I did. But it was the most difficult day of my life when that day came, even though I was handing my daughter over to my parents, who had recently retired and moved down the street to help me with childcare. I was incredibly fortunate, yet I still felt torn.

When Emily was born, my entire view of feminism and motherhood changed. I fell in love with my baby and felt an enormous responsibility toward her like none other I'd ever felt. Prior to my maternity leave, I had been the department chair of four disciplines with budgeting, scheduling, and staffing concerns, but the responsibility of this eight-pound baby weighed more heavily upon me. I had no real desire to return to work. However, I would like to have said that I spent a blissful five months with my baby without any thought of the outside world, but I did not. I had the pressing task of trying to finish writing my dissertation or risk starting from scratch. After finishing my doctorate course work and successfully passing my preliminary examinations, I had five

years in which to finish writing and defending my dissertation to a committee of five other professors. I had passed my preliminary exams in December of 1993. I had Emily in March of 1998. That meant that I had until November of 1998 to submit my dissertation and successfully defend it to make the December graduation deadline, or I would have to start my Ph.D. all over again from the course work level.

Not wanting to begin again after eight years of doctoral study, I decided to work at home writing the last of my dissertation during my maternity leave. I was exhausted. Up most of the night with feeding, I craved sleep like a drug addict craved a fix. During the time that most mothers retreated to their beds for rejuvenating sleep, I hit my computer and notes, slogging through an enormous, theory-ridden dissertation on women's friendship in contemporary women's novels. To help out, a friend of mine volunteered to come each day for about an hour for four weeks to watch Emily while I finished writing and editing my manuscript. It took more time than that, though. I found myself having to sneak in time to write when my husband, Eric, arrived home from work. I was so tired. My head felt empty, as if all my brain cells had been pushed out of the birth canal with the baby. I called my friend Lisa who'd had a promising career as a public relations director before the birth of her first son. She was now a full-time mother of three young boys and somehow managed to freelance in the public relations field from time to time.

"You feel brain-dead, right?" she said, matter-of-factly, as if I should have known about this syndrome from one of those "everything you ever wanted to know about the first year" books.

"Yes." I answered, stunned speechless but that was just the half of it. My one-word answer to Lisa was symptomatic of a recent problem. Complicated sentence constructions gave me undue trouble. My speech was a series of monosyllabic responses peppered with subhuman grunts and whines, a sort of pre-toddler verbal facility level. I started to enjoy watching the *Teletubbies* and understood *Barney* for the first time. Coos, smiles, and cries became languages that I understood while the complexities of psychoanalytic theory started to escape me.

Why hadn't anyone told me about this brain-sapping effect of which my one-word responses was part, which apparently everyone knew about? It must have been part of that feminist conspiracy that Christine Hoff Sommers tried to articulate in *Who Stole Feminism*, the conspiracy that withholds unpleasant information that might be antithetical to the cause. It was so volatile that even she couldn't mention it. Even the *Girlfriend's Guide to Pregnancy* steered clear of this syndrome. For me, losing my facility with language, with complex thinking was devastating. I was a woman for whom words were a livelihood; surely one of our literary grandmothers would have passed along this information.

Despite my verbal challenges, I finished my dissertation. In fact, my dissertation director told me it was much clearer than previous versions. Ah, if

he only knew. Thankfully, he accepted the dissertation and moved it onto the next stage, the defense.

Prior to my dissertation defense, I was incredibly worried that I wouldn't be able to remember anything that I had written.

The morning of my defense was dreadful. We had traveled from Florida to Carbondale, Illinois for the defense. My husband, my seven-month old teething infant, and I had spent a restless night crammed into my mother-in-law's tiny, one-bedroom house. Even after a cup of coffee, I couldn't remember the plot of the novels that I'd written about or the major underpinnings of my dissertation, yet here I was set to defend them to a five-person committee. Two hours before my defense, I tried to discuss my fears with my dissertation director, but he thought it was just nerves. I could remember feeding schedules, diaper changes, all the Teletubbies' names, and all the words to "The Wheels on the Bus." What I couldn't remember so clearly were the names of the major characters in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* or *The Kitchen God's Wife*. They seemed to be moving between texts. Was June in *The Kitchen God's Wife* or was she the narrator of *The Joy Luck Club*? It was too late now. I was finished.

With my husband, daughter, and mother-in-law seated in the back of the room while my committee sat around a conference table, my defense began and just as surely, my daughter started blowing raspberries. The quiet was broken by loud, fart-like mouth sounds. Drool dangled like string from her chin. She stopped when my husband shushed her. The seriousness of the task at hand resumed. My committee members readjusted themselves in their chairs, reshuffled papers, folded their hands on the table and focused their attention on me. Formality encircled the room once more. My dissertation director asked me to explain the process by which I chose my dissertation topic. My mind began to clear.

Like a flashlight in the dark, his voice seemed to clear some of the fog. My words came in polysyllables, connected and coherent. I was articulate and thoughts flowed freely over the most complicated of my theoretical underpinnings. I looked around at my committee members, nodding and smiling at me. I must have been making sense. I looked at my husband, who sat beaming with Emily, my golden-haired cherub, on his lap. I looked at Emily who pursed her lips and blew the most raucous series of raspberries I'd ever heard, louder than anything one would hear in *Animal House* (the cult-classic film about a group of unruly and uncouth fraternity brothers). The flatulence-like stream continued, louder and wetter, until one by one my committee members, who'd up until this point, tried to ignore my little imp, starting throwing paternal and maternal glances her way in an effort to stifle the onslaught of steady mouth-farts. I don't know how I resisted laughter or even a verbal censure. I kept talking, as if unaffected. It must have been my training in vocal performance that pushed me to declare mentally, "The show must go on." My husband removed Emily from the room when it was clear that she was a scene-stealer like her mother.

When the two hours had elapsed after difficult, probing questions, I was asked to leave the conference room and wait in the reception area of the English department office while my committee deliberated on the success of my dissertation and defense. My mother-in-law, who had been the only family present during the entire process, said that I'd done fabulously. Emily was still blowing raspberries, thrilled by all the attention that she received from college students passing by. After about 15 minutes, my dissertation director invited me back into the room to congratulate me as Dr. Detore-Nakamura. I could hardly believe it. One of my committee members, one of the toughest, commented that my dissertation was brilliant and that my defense was exemplary. All and each committee member said it was an excellent study. If they had only known that my dissertation was written between breast feedings and diaper changes.

With my new title, I returned to Florida, back to my job and my role as wife, mother, professor, and writer. It's been almost two years since my dissertation defense. Since that time, I have penned a series of poems, several short stories, a few essays, and an article, and continued working on my novel. My brain seems to be functioning normally too. In fact, my facility with language is even better, and I've gained a new kind of respect for myself. I know that I can do anything now. I've recently gathered the courage to send some of my work off for publication consideration, something I had stopped doing even before I began pregnant. I also have a new topic now – motherhood. Some of my newest poems are about motherhood and writing, about the challenges and frustrations of it all. I try to articulate the aspects of motherhood, the good ones and the unexpected ones, that our literary foremothers didn't tell us.

As I sit here, at my computer desk, my daughter's voice rings throughout the house, echoed in baby monitors. Her father watches her now, while I write this essay. I'm not sure that he considers this "mandatory," this writing, not like the grading of papers or the finishing of a project for a grant. However, he doesn't complain much and many times serves as my first editor. I know that I couldn't do it alone, not without him or my parents who watch Emily while I work. For single mothers who write, like Toni Morrison, it must be a difficult task, writing. Writing is like breathing though, the unconscious need to write, drawing lives rather than breaths. It is like giving birth, a clichéd metaphor now, but still apt. Yet, I have found that giving birth is the least difficult task. The constant tending, watching, and nurturing that one must give to writing, as to toddlers, is the most taxing. It is the one process that makes the most demands and the one that yields the highest rewards. My draft, though, will remain in this state until I pick it up again and choose to revise it; my toddler will not. Excuse me, won't you? I need to check on my daughter.