

**A Selection from *Three Layers of Night***

by Vanessa Barbara

sample tr Zoë Perry and Julia Sanches

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*I'm no more your mother*

*Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow*

*Effacement at the wind's hand*

Sylvia Plath, "Morning Song"

It's not like it happened on a whim. Around the time I got pregnant, I was seeing two psychoanalysts—a man on Tuesdays and a woman on Wednesdays. Neither of them was able to help me decide whether or not to have children. On Fridays, my tap dance instructor assured me that a woman never knows real love until she becomes a mother. My friends, being more pragmatic, had always had their doubts. It's just that, years ago, I'd proven utterly incapable of dealing with the psychological pressures of caring for a dog—an adorable, spotted rescue with wiry hair that eventually went to live with my friend Théo. She used to try to get me out of bed by vigorously licking my hand. (She never succeeded.)

Some of my family members claimed that having kids would solve my chronic depression. Others said I wouldn't get to sleep in so late if I had a baby, "fixing" my circadian rhythm disorder. My hypersomnia would be forever eclipsed by the grandeur of my true purpose in life. Having

kids would be a way-out from my stagnating career, my sore neck, the anxiety, my complete disinterest in cooking, and even my difficulty memorizing tap dance routines.

In any case, I never properly made the decision. It all happened so fast. That faint red line on the pregnancy test slowly acquired a shape, a heartbeat on ultrasounds, steadily expanding and tracing the beginnings of fingers, nails, hair. “Silence! I’m making a cornea”, I would say, lying on the couch.

An apple seed turned into a pea and then a blueberry, an olive, a plum, a peach, a lemon, an orange, and an onion. It was always healthy, which really surprised me. Then the onion grew into a potato, a mango, a cantaloupe, a head of lettuce, an eggplant, a pineapple, a pumpkin, and a watermelon—my pregnancy lasted forty fleet-footed weeks, by the end of which the baby was the size of a jackfruit. I kept up my tap dance classes, though now I was more unwieldy. During this period, the effect of all the hormones and the need to respect my true nocturnal nature (I couldn’t take sleeping pills or stimulants anymore) enveloped me in an auspicious haze that would only lift a week after giving birth.

I don’t remember much after that. The first few weeks were a blur of intense sleep deprivation, with a dash of adrenaline leftover from the birth and a vague hopefulness that this might just work out. When the adrenaline finally wore off, I was left with an angry baby who spent much of his time screaming. He was like a Swiss baby, waking to feed every hour on the hour, like clockwork.

He was born in May, just before winter. Our first few days home, I moved the nursing chair to the warmest part of the apartment—facing a wall—and slept sitting up, my head barely supported, dreaming I dropped my son on the floor. We were a pair of diaper-wearing creatures,

both uncomfortable with real-world weather conditions. He pooped green while I bled. We cried all day, usually at the same time.

I started having blackouts. My mother, sister-in-law, and neighbor practically moved in so they could help, but the problem wasn't just a difficult baby. The problem was always the mother.

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What makes me most sad is that she tried. In October 1962, after her husband left her with two young children in a house in rural England, a poet with a history of suicide attempts told her friend: "I am getting a divorce, and you are right, it is freeing. I am writing for the first time in years, a real self, long smothered. I get up at 4 a.m. when I wake & it is black, & write till the babes wake. It is like writing in a train tunnel, or God's intestine."

Whenever I read and re-read this passage, I have the impression that this time she will get back on her feet. A few months after finding out her husband was cheating on her and no longer interested in the relationship—something he made abundantly clear—Sylvia Plath moved to London and hatched a plan to start over. "My bedroom will be my study—it faces the rising sun," she wrote on December 14, 1962. She had an optimistic outlook. In a matter of months, she published a novel, *The Bell Jar*, written in 1961, and composed the best poems of her career. She said she intended to furnish the entire apartment slowly, "poem by poem."

But winter hit hard, and in February 1963, she gave up. "We have come so far, it is over," she wrote shortly before she killed herself, in her last poem, "Edge." It was the coldest winter of the century in England.

Plath suffered from bipolar disorder, as did her paternal grandmother, who died in a psychiatric hospital, and at least two other women in her family. In her last two weeks of life, she took an anti-depressant—an MAOI (monoamine oxidase inhibitor), a class of drugs known for its complex interaction with other substances and medications—as well as an antipyretic, codeine (for sinusitis), and Drinamyl (a combination of amphetamines and barbiturates). She may have also been on cold medication. One Monday morning, faced with the prospect of being hospitalized yet again for another round of ECT (electroconvulsive therapy), Plath took her own life.

ECT had already saved Plath’s life after a suicide attempt ten years earlier, but the initial four sessions at Valley Head Hospital were performed without anesthesia or a muscle relaxant, which made the experience quite terrifying. (Later sessions, held at McLean Hospital, were conducted differently.) Even though the procedure had proven vital in the past, Plath was unwilling to go through it again.

In her book *The Silent Woman*, writer Janet Malcolm interprets Sylvia Plath’s suicide as an attempt to have the last word, lamenting that her ex-husband Ted Hughes was given no opportunity to reply. “Survivors are forever in the wrong. They are like the damned, who can never make amends, who have no hope of grace,” she writes.

She’s not wrong. On the other hand, I wonder what kind of last words a woman can even have in the face of such violence and circumstances like hers, where the power dynamic is so unequal. For Plath’s biographer, Heather Clark, the final message of her last poem, “Edge,” was not only one of despair but of rage.

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My depressive disorder is unipolar, meaning that, unlike other poets and writers, I don't experience periods of euphoria crosscut with episodes of intense despair. For this other group of people, low-energy phases are contained, time-limited, and give way to more euphoric phases. For me, they're like plodding around with a pair of anvils bound to my feet. All the time. It's a monumental effort, and still I barely move an inch. Most days, the impression from the outside is that I am standing still while wildly flailing my arms.

(Now, I use one of my arms to cradle a baby.)

Sylvia Plath's depression was episodic. She knew that one of her triggers was getting less than eight hours of sleep a day. According to Heather Clark, "hot baths, sun, and sleep" were her main strategies for staying in control. When all else failed, she tried to draw energy from external validation, such as a publication, a fellowship, or the announcement of a new prize.

Plath had two major depressive episodes. The first, in mid-1953, happened when she was twenty years old, after a discouraging stint in New York that she described in *The Bell Jar*. Later, Plath had wanted to take a writing seminar with Frank O'Connor at Harvard University but was not accepted into the program. She decided to write at home for the next few months, though she failed to produce anything. "People think I have this great writing power and that the images just pour out, and the fact is my mind is blank," she confessed to a friend. "I keep seeing that moon go up; I keep seeing that moon go down," she said. Later, she described her depression to a boyfriend as an "organic, existing, living thing."

Clark astutely observes that Plath's inability to write was not so much the cause of her depression as one of its symptoms. In the following months, she saw a psychiatrist, did electroshock therapy, tried to kill herself, and was committed to a psychiatric hospital, where she underwent further ECT, and eventually recovered.

In this case, she had a full remission. By mid-1954, less than a year after her suicide attempt, Plath was writing her thesis, studying German, and functioning at a high academic level without much struggle—all of which would have left her exhausted and full of self-doubt under other circumstances. “The best thing is that the topic itself intrigues me, and that no matter how I work on it, I shall never tire of it,” she wrote about her thesis. Her poems were published in various journals, and one even won a prize. She received a full tuition scholarship to Smith College, and was accepted at the Harvard summer school. During the summer break, she dyed her hair blond and had several boyfriends. She rejoined Smith’s rowing team. Before the end of the academic term, she turned in a first draft of her thesis.

1963, almost a decade later: the image I have is of a car that’s low on gas and moves forward by inertia alone while trying but failing to start. Plath hopes the recent U.K. publication of *The Bell Jar* will be a commercial success; this does not happen, despite positive reviews. To make matters worse, two U.S. publishers pass on the book. “American publication would have renewed her optimism and self-confidence at a time when she was nearly running on empty. Instead, the rejections depleted her already low reserves of energy and validated her worst self-criticisms,” Clark remarks.

Running on empty: an apt definition for the chronically depressed.

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Before the baby was six months old, we started introducing solid foods, alternating with formula and breastmilk. It was a popular and critical success. He devoured all kinds of fruit and developed

a penchant for bananas and avocados. Per the pediatrician's recommendation, he also took liquid vitamins and an iron supplement that turned his poop a frightening shade of black.

One day, while I was having breakfast at the dining room table, the baby strained and strained in his bouncer before finally grinning with relief. I went on chewing my bread as if all of that activity had nothing to do with me. A boy scout at heart, Leandro quietly got up and carried our bundle of joy to the bedroom. The sound of diapers opening. And in the distance, a voice: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. . ."

I also remember the time the baby had a massive, earth-shaking bowel movement—thirty seconds of squelching followed by a putrid cloud of stench. Then he smiled (as always) and went to sleep. We prayed for a few seconds, too daunted to take the necessary measures. When the time came to change his diaper, we undid every snap of his onesie, lowered his bunny rabbit leggings, and took off his baby mittens. Just in case. This gave birth to the inside joke, "a gloves-off poop": when the fecal sludge is so oozy and voluminous that there is no way of knowing where it will end up. (Days later, I found a pasty substance of the snot-vomit-poo variety clinging to the ends of my hair.)

Despite our success in the solid food arena, with its slew of fecal surprises, the baby still took over an hour to get to sleep and woke up five or so times a night. He had a room to himself, decorated in moons and planets. Because of my circadian rhythm disorder, we'd never been able to sleep in the same bed. After we introduced solid food, I was on call for the night shift, usually while writing at my desk or catching up on housework. Whenever the baby let out a loud cry, I'd drop what I was doing and nurse him or give him prune juice ("to summon the poop"), and he usually nursed until drifting off to sleep with that peaceful look we dubbed his "drunk face." Only

once he was sound asleep would he let me put him back in bed. If I tried to lay him down a minute too soon, I had hell to pay for my recklessness.

Sometimes in the mornings, my partner would ask how the night had gone, how many times the baby had cried, but the post-traumatic amnesia prevented me from answering. I couldn't tell apart the day before from the previous week. That's when I started scribbling on my arm, in pen, how many times I was visited by the Silents—evil humanoids from *Doctor Who*. The following day, we'd share a moment of horror that was thankfully soon forgotten. Here is an arm note from when the baby was six months old: woke up screaming at 21:15, at 23:00, at 1:10 (prune juice), at 2:25, at 4:15, at 5:15. (He was usually up for the day between 5:20 and 6:30).

Nearly every morning, I watched the sun trickle through the blinds of the baby's bedroom window with my back against the cool wall. As idyllic as this may sound, what I was actually doing was count my breaths and think that, judging by the height of the sun, it was only an hour or two until Leandro took over.

That day, when I went to my bedroom around 7:00 A.M. to lie down, the door was closed. I confess I opened it very gingerly so that I wouldn't startle myself awake, on the off-chance that I was sleeping.

## **FIELD NOTES**

4:50 A.M. Leandro wakes up to help me with a urinary emergency.

“...And then he wet himself head to toe...”

...And I pulled his onesie on over his leggings...

...And I let his sleep sack dry out...



...And we need to get another blanket...

...And you are correct, I am not wearing pants.”

(Another typical early morning at the house.)

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## FIELD NOTES

Me: “Sam Esmail has a new TV series. It looks interesting.”

Leandro: [*eats mouthful of spaghetti*]

Me: “...Shame we don’t have a life.”

Leandro: [*swallows*] “We could check out the plot on Wikipedia, just to see what happens.”

Me: [*excited*] “We can read one episode over dinner every night!”

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In November 1961, shortly before she gave birth to her second child, Sylvia Plath was awarded the prestigious Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship, affiliated with the publisher Harper & Row, to write a novel. She’d asked for enough money (\$2,080) to pay for a full-time nanny and cleaner. She seemed happy with her professional and family life back then. She and her husband, fellow poet Ted Hughes, took turns caring for their daughter so that the other could write. Sylvia worked mornings and he worked afternoons.

Their new baby, Nicholas, was born in January 1962. On July 9, Plath picked up the phone and discovered that Hughes was having an affair with the poet Assia Wevill. She wrote (and published) numerous poems on the subject, such as “Words Heard, By Accident, Over the Phone”, in which she says: “O god, how shall I ever clean the phone table?” In a letter to her former American psychiatrist, in whom she confided from a distance, she declared that she could no longer sleep or eat. “I feel ugly and a fool, when I have so long felt beautiful and capable of being a wonderful happy mother and wife and writing novels for fun and money.”

They were turbulent months. In September, she decided they should separate—after hearing several versions of the affair from her husband, going weeks with no knowledge of his whereabouts (Hughes was with Wevill in Spain), watching their joint bank account dwindle, and having to take care of a baby and a two-year-old on her own, with no relatives or friends nearby. In a letter to writer Olive Higgins Prouty, her mentor, friend and benefactor, she said: “It will take time to mend, & more time to begin to feel there is any other life possible for me, but I am resolute and shall work hard.”

That same day, however, she confessed to her psychiatrist: “I am drowning, just gasping for air.” And she went on: “My life with him has been a daily creation, new ideas, new thoughts, our mutual stimulation. Now he is active and passionately in love out in the world and I am stuck with two infants and I have no one.” In the same letter, she says: “I feel so trapped. Every view is blocked by a huge vision of their bodies entwined in passion across it, him writing immortal poems to her. And all the people of our circle are with them, for them.” Later, she only commented that it was difficult “to face a gossipy professional world in which my husband’s best friends are my employers and now they all know I have been deserted and for whom and under what conditions”.

In spite of everything, Sylvia Plath tried. She started taking sleeping pills early in the night and getting up before dawn to write while the children slept. In October, she completed about a poem a day—almost as many as she had written in 1960 and 1961. These would later become *Ariel*. According to Heather Clark, Plath filled her work with images of “torture, murder, genocide, war, suicide, illness, revenge and fury—but also spring, rebirth and triumph”.

She finally found a nanny to help take care of the children. As soon as they went to bed, Plath went up to her study with dinner and ate while she worked, “surrounded by books, photos, cartoons and poems pinned to the wall.” That year, *The New Yorker* magazine rejected all but one of the poems she submitted from October to December. As the rejection letters rolled in, her optimism and creative drive became harder to sustain.

Even so, in early December, Plath moved her children to London, where she rented part of William Butler Yeats’ house—cashing in on her husband’s fame, as if her own were not enough—and found an excellent nursery for her eldest daughter, who was two and a half years old. Although she still didn’t have specialized psychiatric care, she did begin to see a general practitioner.

This is when the worst winter of the century hit England. Yeats’ house had no central heating. In January, the pipes froze, leaving Plath without running water for several days; the bathtub drain clogged, which meant none of them could wash; on top of everything, the roof sprung several leaks. There were constant power outages, with days-long blackouts. Plath and her children got very sick. In her prose piece, “Snow Blitz,” she wrote: “I wrapped my daughter in a blanket with the hot water bottle and set her over a bowl of warm milk and her favorite puzzle. The baby I dressed in a snow suit.” Even with a fever, Plath wrote by candlelight, fingers virtually frozen stiff. She also had financial troubles.

When the weather improved in January, she reflected: “And what if there is another snow blitz? And another?” Here she seems to be referring not only to the weather but also to her depression. In that same period, she wrote the poem “Child,” in which she claimed to want to fill her son’s eyes with “colors and ducks,” in other words, with pretty things and not “this dark ceiling without a star”—that is, her mental state.

In the last letter she sent to her psychiatrist, dated February 4, she wrote that “it is torture to me to dress, plan meals, put one foot in front of the other.” She confessed: “What appals [*sic*] me is the return of my madness, my paralysis, my fear & vision of the worst—cowardly withdrawal, a mental hospital, lobotomies. . .”

Around this time, her GP recommended she continue taking sleeping pills, prescribed an anti-depressant, and started visiting her daily. It could take a month for the medications to have an effect. On Friday, the 8th, Dr. John Horder found her in such an awful state that he considered having her committed to a psychiatric hospital the following Monday. He promised to send a nurse to check in on her in the morning and help her look after the children.

That was the day Plath killed herself: a Monday, February 11<sup>th</sup>, around seven in the morning. She left two bottles of milk and a plate with bread and butter in the bedroom for the children, who were asleep—Frieda, nearly three, and Nicholas, one—and had the forethought to seal the gaps around the door with towels, rags, and heavy tape. She opened the gas jets and stuck her head in the oven. A few hours later, the nurse found her body.

In the poem “Edge,” Plath used the word *perfected* to refer to a dead woman—*perfected*, as if she were a work of art, a controlled experiment, unreactive. Only dead women are able to be perfect. Only dead women can give answers.

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I don't know whose idea it was to get a Montessori bed. This smug piece of furniture consists of a base that sits on the floor and a crib mattress that forces grown-ups to get up and down dozens of times a day to assist a squalling baby. The challenges of this task grew in direct proportion to our success in introducing solid foods. Besides the morning nanny, my sister-in-law, my mother, my mother-in-law, and Leda, we sometimes had a physical therapist come over twice a week to help with our neck and lower-back pain.

(Fine, I do know whose idea it was to get a Montessori bed: it was mine.)

But the decision not to give the baby a pacifier was one we came to together. Leandro and I decided to stand our ground because we'd suffered too long and too hard to surrender to the pacifier "at this point in the game." Yet another poor choice in our trajectory as parents, one we insisted on out of pure stubbornness. Although the baby never used the aforementioned accessory, he treated my breast like a pacifier, took forever to fall asleep, and put a number of random, filthy things in his mouth. If I could go back in time, I would give him polenta at the very first sign of trouble, followed by a pacifier, then put the baby to sleep in a magnificent crib. (I would also stop Leandro from feeding him the rest of the baby Tylenol in the syringe, thus avoiding the Great Morning Puke Fest Post-MenB.)

On the issue of accessories: I thought a nasal aspirator might come in handy until the moment I used it and ingested a thick glob of greenish mucus; that was when I decided I'd suffered enough indignities. A friend of mine who supported this boycott said: "I raised my first kid without sucking out snot, and I plan on doing the same with my second!" There was a manual version of the gadget, but the baby hated it. Nose washes with syringes, squirt bottles, and nasal sprays

invariably led to outraged crying, kicking, and elbowing. On the other hand, the digital no-touch thermometer and portable vibrating mesh nebulizer were things of beauty. The dry heating pad for colic was more-or-less effective, especially because it also warmed the parents' bellies in the process. I tried out the more sustainable cloth diapers for a whole four days. The baby liked them, but I thought actual sleep was a better use of my time than dozing off with my head against the utility sink.

At bedtime, we carried out a series of rituals aimed at signaling to the baby that it was time to increase his melatonin production. We ran a warm bath and put on soft music. I massaged him with lavender oil. We said goodnight to all the things in the house and read him stories. He laughed at our efforts. Wide-eyed. Sometimes he laughed so hard he'd drool and take offense at the cold wet spot that kept him from sleeping, so we'd have to change the sheets, which in turn made him more alert, and so on and so forth.

Unlike other children, he never had much of a relationship with his security blanket. One night, during our sleep rituals, Leandro affectionately whispered: "Look, the little sheep is sleeping!" The baby proceeded to grab his security blanket and slam the sheep's head against the mattress over and over, as if to say: "No, she's not. She's dead."

In 1965, two years after Sylvia Plath's death, *Ariel* was published. That same year, Ted Hughes and Assia Wevill had a daughter, nicknamed Shura. Wevill helped care for Nicholas and Frieda (Plath's children) and moved to Court Green, the family home in rural England. According to reports from friends, she was tormented by Plath's shadow, to whom she considered herself inferior. Hughes did not want to marry Wevill and continued having affairs with other women. So she decided to rent an apartment in London, where she lived with Shura.

In 1969, six years after Plath's suicide, Wevill decided to die in the same way, from carbon monoxide poisoning, taking her four-year-old daughter with her. Both were found on a mattress in the kitchen.

Nicholas Hughes, who was a baby when his mother died by suicide, hanged himself in 2009, at the age of forty-seven, during a probable depressive episode.

“The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,  
And comes from a country far away as health.”

(Sylvia Plath, “Tulips”)

Throughout pregnancy, postpartum and breastfeeding, I never stopped taking a common antidepressant, sertraline, which is considered relatively safe. I increased the dose in the months after birth. Even though the medication didn't cure my depression, it did help alleviate the symptoms—no small feat in these situations. In any case, sleep was obviously more useful than any type of psychotherapy, in the short, medium, and long term: the results were remarkable. I stopped dozing off in the middle of my sentences and bringing my flip-flop down on fruit seeds, convinced they were cockroaches. I more or less went back to respecting my delayed sleep phase: I cooked in the middle of the night, when I felt most awake, and slept in late. I even considered taking up tap dancing again. I stopped having “therapy nightmares,” harrowing therapy-induced dreams about dead ends that we analyzed at our next session and were thus played back on loop, in a vicious cycle of torture.

Selena came over to help in the mornings, which put me more at ease. She was very experienced, replenished our arsenal of lullabies, and took the baby out for some fresh air and for a walk around the ground floor of our building. She told him stories, showed him the birds in the trees. Together, they laughed all morning. Unlike me, she seemed so calm and confident.

Sometimes he fell asleep faster with Selena—her voice was beautiful—but usually only after about twenty minutes of being held. The day he was passed from my arms to Leandro’s, then Leda’s, my sister-in-law’s, my mother’s—everyone gave up after about ten minutes of rocking him—before finally snuggling into Selena’s arms and falling asleep, has gone down in the canon of domestic mythology.

In *The Nursery*, Szilvia Molnar said she regretted not proposing to the hospital’s night nurse: “I tell myself that next time she comes back I’ll give her many more loud and clear *Thank yous*,” she decided. “I’ll ask her if she has any kids, or maybe that’s too direct. I’ll ask her how long she’s been at this hospital. We’ll take it from there. And depending on how that conversation goes, I’ll ask her to run away with me before dawn comes.” Selena was my on-call nurse, except she came to my rescue every morning.

Meanwhile, Leda sent me encouraging notes and left pot pies on the doormat—she knew not to ring the doorbell, as mother or baby might be napping. She was the one who noticed that I still couldn’t call him by his name—for many, many months, he remained “the baby”—but she said this was normal, as bonding could take time.

Back then, the baby woke up in pain several nights in a row because of what we assumed was teething; I would rub a dollop of analgesic gel on his gums, and he would suck on my finger for approximately fifteen minutes before falling asleep. Not long after this particularly sleepless period, two little teeth appeared at the same time, one on top and the other on the bottom.



When the third one began to emerge from under his gum, presaging another two or three sleepless nights before it tore its way through once and for all, Leandro declared: “It’s fine. My entire social life is going on Goodreads once a week and seeing what people are reading.”

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### **FIELD NOTES: *MOTHERS ON THE LOOSE***

It’s not uncommon to see them looking up at the sky for no apparent reason, squinting at the sun. Their physical appearance swings from anemic to dramatic, but they smile a lot and may appear euphoric when encountering a pigeon or a jackfruit seller.

These are women who recently had a child (days or months ago) and suddenly find themselves trapped inside the house, stuck in an infinite loop of breastfeeding, compulsory burping, and diaper changes, interrupted only by the baby’s tenuous and timely naps.

Twenty-four hours a day, they must bathe their little crying creature, rock them, and manage their colic. They must apply ointments, wipe spit up, suck gunk out of noses. When the baby finally naps, these women go to the bathroom, eat, shower and Google: “My baby doesn’t blink, is that normal?” They are sleep deprived. To make matters worse, they may still be dealing with postpartum bleeding and need to change their own diapers. Brushing teeth is a luxury. Buttoning up blouses is out of the question.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Szilvia Molnar talks about a “survival tango”, where both dancers are clumsy and find themselves in a vulnerable position.

One day, however, they manage to go outside for a moment—either to the bank, or to the doctor, right after the two o'clock feeding. And they can barely contain their excitement at discovering that a world still exists out there. They can be seen laughing to themselves and picking flowers from the ground. They make a point of staring at everyone, as if they were amazed to be interacting with other adults, and strike up conversations with anyone careless enough to allow eye contact, warmly greeting strangers in line at the bank. They feel an almost immediate connection with subway ticket agents, doormen, and people dressed up in fruit costumes. They tell people things no one asked. They need human contact, to feel the breeze. They always sit in the highest seat on the bus, so they can open the windows as wide as they'll go. For them, going to another neighborhood is like sailing to China.

Ordinary people beware, as these women may have lost their sense of depth perception. Sometimes they apologize to the trashcan they just bumped into; they either speak too loud or too quiet and forget how certain words are pronounced. Be patient with them and try not to notice that they are wearing their shirt inside out.

If their baby is not in a sling, they live in constant fear of forgetting them somewhere. They find it unnerving—disturbing, even—the feeling of levity that comes from not having to left around a massive belly or the baby outside it. They mistake ringtones for crying and desperately grope around to make sure the baby hasn't slipped out of their hands and fallen. They sigh when they realize they're alone—it's strange.

If their baby is in tow, they point out helicopters in the sky and reel off enthusiastic remarks about the color of the passersby's hair. They make a point of including the baby in conversation and try (in vain) to get them to understand that a burp is not an appropriate reply to "What a

cutie!” In stores, they learn to fish coins out of their pockets with their left hands while shaking the rattle between their teeth.

Despite their bewilderment and obvious social incongruence, they know they must accomplish twenty-two tasks in six different locations between three and four in the afternoon, which is when their hall pass expires and the baby needs to nurse again. (Hence the importance of preferential service for nursing mothers, regardless of whether their babies are with them, as enshrined in the 2000 federal law 10 048.) This explains why they can be seen behaving frantically in the supermarket, as if compelled by a ticking time bomb, trying to make the most out of the few minutes they have left in the outside world. They complete missions like guided missiles: first the drugstore (cotton pads, ointment, fever reducers), then the bakery (bread, milk), the supermarket (disinfectant, onion, coffee), and finally butterfly stickers, plastic slinkies, and soft books for the baby.

New mothers on the loose in the city are like those high winds that bring rain. Respect them, or they might just start whipping cows through the air.