

Count Your Blessings

1. Would I be soiled if I had been his and not his?

What can I tell you of my father, your grandfather? It is too simple to say, “he was a bad man”. I know he did bad things, but I didn’t know him long enough, or well enough, to say that was constitutive of the person he was. It pains me, for your sake, to think that the badness was inherent as opposed to acted-out. What would that mean for you, the inheritance diluted at least by your own father’s blood? What would that mean for me? The intermediary, the transmitter, the host. There are parts of me I can trace directly to him. My cold blue eyes, the paleness of my skin, the paintbrush in my hand.

What can I tell you of my stepfather? You met him of course, not very often, and the meetings were clouded by his illness. You don’t remember him now. But he was a good man. I can say that for sure. Before he started to disappear, before the shakes, the memory loss, the bouts of vicious vitriol... he was good. A good father, a good husband, a good man. What would I have been if I had been his and not the other’s? Would I carry a different pain? Would I have inherited another bad? Perhaps I would not be me at all, and perhaps you would not be you.

The humble handkerchief has been used as a mode of expression in the Western world for hundreds of years. They have been waved to say “goodbye”, dropped to say “come here”, knotted to say “I remember”, given to say “good luck”. Decorative styles could be used to give a new look to an old outfit, particularly when other resources were scarce.

But this handkerchief is not silk or lace, nor coloured or patterned. It is cheap, mass manufactured - it has little value. It is made for practical purposes. To clean, smear, wipe away abject fluids and make the user presentable. To bind the holes in the boundaries, to stop us from leaking out. And once it has done its work, it is secreted away on the person until it has no more use and is thrown away. It is rarely shared. A personal object.

When it is pulled out to cover the mouth or nose as we sneeze, we may say “bless you”. In times past, sneezes were thought to be an omen or warning from the gods, a sign of the plague and requiring god’s intervention to protect us. An even more ancient belief was that a sneeze might accidentally expel the spirit from the body unless prevented. What is the hankie in this context then? A net to capture the spirit and force it back? A more solid but still permeable boundary between the self and the non-self?

2. Would I carry her still if I had not seen what I have seen?

You look so much like me – although your eyes are green and not blue. And they sparkle with life, with a joy just below the surface that is always about to break through. When I was a child, my eyes rarely met those of the people around me. In my first school photo I look to the camera, but the smile is hesitant, my body curled slightly, protective, unwilling to open out. I was good at disappearing. Into books, into making and drawing. I could hide well.

I cannot help but compare us as your first school photos appear – a set of mischievous grimaces that I collage in a series and put up on the wall. I laugh out loud every time I look at them. Your vibrancy is infectious my child. But even its power can't reach the child within me, the one I carry still. Sometimes she feels as light as a feather, but I am always aware of her presence. There have been periods of my life when her weight pinned me down, inescapable, wallowing in self-pity and grief. I would like to let her go but we are tethered, she and I. What could I have been if she had not lived through the bad things? If her eyes had been as full of light as yours? Perhaps I would not be me at all, and perhaps you would not be you.

Sewing is one of the only records of the lived experiences of women that has survived the ravages of time and patriarchy. Stories considered not worthy of telling, that would have been lost, articulated through delicate needlework, subversive design, skills passed down through generations of women. When I sit and sew the handkerchief, I connect to those lost stories, to a history that would otherwise have been erased.

The handkerchief moves with the breeze in my studio. It does not resist the piercing from my needle, the thread drawn through. There is so little movement required in my making. The rhythmic to and fro of my hand, the meditative quiet. I sit in commune with my sisters before me, with the woman-child within me.

The status of embroidery was a victim of the system of repression that marginalised women, devaluing their artistic output as domestic craft. It became a form of repression, a distraction for wealthy idle hands that could not work, and heads that were not permitted education. I think of the words that I stitch. Questions that have repressed my growth, distractions from my healing.

I wonder if, even in their darkness, they are love notes.

3. Would I feel more if I had not followed him there?

I suppose it was inevitable that I sought a love that was not second-hand. A love that was not unilateral. A love that didn't feel like the acid burn in my throat after vomiting. And so, when I had the choice between independence, or following my first love to university, I chose the latter. A foolish choice. I took for granted the privilege of being educated, of having choice - and I stayed with my man. Fool, fool, fool. I curse myself for being so short-sighted. For trying to patch over the tears with someone else's love.

It did not take long for me to regret my choice. To realise I had failed my potential out of fear of being rejected, of being alone.

I hope our love for you gives you the strength to pursue your interests selfishly. To prioritise your need for growth. I want you to soar into the night sky until you have spent all your fuel and your rocket is pulled back into the gravitational pull of adult compromise. I want you to be able to reach for it all, knowing you will fail, but willing to hold tight to the things that fulfil you most.

I held so much resentment for my first childish love, that cartoon bandage, until I met your father. And then it was useless to me. If I had not made the choice I had made I would not have met him then, and I could not have willed you into the world. I would not be me and you would not be you. I discard the regret, the question and I let the bandage fall to the floor. It is redundant now.

I knot the thread and hold it at the front of the work as I stitch. A record of the act of starting. A record of my hand. The thread becomes twisted as I work and gradually another knot forms and I allow it to sit within the text, to become part of it. The writing is fragile, hurried, but the stitching is slow, tracing the lines and curves and reinforcing them, their complexity increasing with each iteration. It cannot be undone unless it is unpicked, unknotted and cut. I weave a question with the thread, and it is embellished with my faults.

When the handkerchief is finished, I shall show it for all to see. The text is small, barely readable. People will have to crane their necks and furrow their brows to make it out, they will stand close to it, perhaps they will smell my blood on the surface, the acrid stench of the burnt fabric. Perhaps dried mud will fall on their shoes.

I think of the handkerchiefs as evidence of a crime, of my inertia. I think of them as butterflies captured and pinned. As specimens, rare and fragile, some caught mid-flight, and some collected as corpses on the ground. I wonder what it means for someone else to look at them from the outside, to participate in their exposure. Do they see themselves reflected? If not, are they glad? Do they wonder at what I am willing to show, what I willing to sell?

4. Would I have let go of so much if we had been more secure?

Before my stepfather gathered us in his embrace and rescued us from the bad things, my mother worked two, sometimes three jobs. A machinist in a textile factory, a server in a chip shop, a barmaid. All her money went into the small, terraced house she purchased with my father who spent the money he sporadically earned on drink and drugs. She signed it over to him when she finally escaped. He had held hostage his parental rights over me, a commodity he was willing to bargain with. It was a gross introduction to capitalism. Everything has a price.

She was from a poor family, her own father a dustman, her mother a factory girl. She and I lived with them on and off, a council house in the north of England, shared with her sisters and their children. It was a place of noise and chaos and unconditional love. But my mother wanted a different life for herself, and for me. And so, her tiger love praised and encouraged my academic ability. She saw it as a way out and drilled it into me to seek financial stability in my adulthood. Creativity was a hobby, a pastime. I was to pursue a career with which I could buy a home, travel, pay my bills.

And I did well, I followed the path. I let ambition shape my personality - I was brazen in my grasping. But that life made me sick, I had panic attacks, my head buzzed and hummed, and I had no peace. Until you came along, and I had to reorient my will to your needs. I knew then that I couldn't return. I needed more meaning, and being your mother helped me find it. I wanted to know more about you, about people, about life. I wanted to create. I wanted you to understand me.

I follow a path now that has no stability, and it terrified me at first to rely on your father to provide where I cannot provide for you, or myself. But I trust him. And my heart became peaceful when I closed the door on that fear. It's still there - perhaps one day it will live on my shoulder again. But for now, I wash it clean and fold it thinking of the question it holds: if the ground beneath me had been solid all along, would I have compromised so early? Perhaps I would not be me at all, and perhaps you would not be you.

Why do I make? Why does it bring me peace? I am blessed, I know, to have the time to think, to try, to learn, to explore, to create. It is a privilege I wrestle with. How to acknowledge it? As I sew the handkerchief, as I pin it to the mount, I think of the final object's uselessness. All those hours of research to make something with no function beyond provocation. Is provocation a use? Is it the pivot turning privilege into statement, into action, however gentle and quiet. Will my own exposure help others to shed the questions they hold? The questions they have caused in others?

According to Foucault, a spiritual pursuit for the truth requires either a conversion movement, or a form of work of self upon the self to make the subject capable of truth. Having completed this work and gaining access to the truth the subject is transformed again by it – they are enlightened, their soul tranquil. Perhaps this is why I make - I think of my work as a form of work upon myself, a labour of ascesis.

5. Would my heart be whole if I had wanted her less?

I had wished for you for many years. I would talk to you before you were conceived, one hand on my lower belly, knowing the egg that would form you had been with me since birth. But before you there was another. Lost early, no more than a line on a test and a tidal wave of hope which crashed with the words "it's not growing". A scream which took hours to surface.

And after you there was another. One that shouldn't have been. One we were told wasn't possible. And I wasn't ready for it. My body was not recovered from your birth, from my near-death. The exploded fragments of my mind were only just coalescing and held together by fragile bonds.

The truth is I wanted only you. I grieve for the others, but I would not give up the chance I have to tie this single unbreakable thread. Their loss burned a dark hole in my soul, and I know it will not heal but it is a price I am willing to pay. I cannot imagine not being consumed with wanting you. Perhaps I would not be me at all, and perhaps you would not be you.

One interpretation of the Delphic prescription "know yourself" is "when you question the oracle, examine yourself closely and the questions you are going to ask, those you wish to ask, and, since you must restrict yourself to the fewest questions and not ask too many, carefully consider yourself and what you need to know."

In Ancient Greece, to know oneself was often coupled with, but subordinated to, the principle "to take care of oneself". Plato said it is absurd not to know oneself if one aspires to know everything else. Seneca said he must take care of the estate close by. In Epictetus, to take care of the self is to understand it as the "subject of" a certain number of things: the subject of instrumental action, of relationships with other people, of behaviour and attitudes in general, and the subject also of relationships to oneself.

According to Foucault: "Stultitia is the other pole to the practice of the self. The practice of the self must deal with stultitia as its raw material and the objective is to escape from it... The stultus is someone who has not cared for himself, they are blown by the wind and open to the external world...[they] accept these representations without examining them, without knowing how to analyse what they represent..."

To escape from Stultitia would be to strive towards the self as the only object one can will freely, absolutely and always..."

Perhaps I should accept my questions are pointless, meaningless - I am me regardless of my understanding of how or why. Spread over a life, they are ambiguous, they say neither things would be better or worse, but I know, if bad things had not happened, I would not be here and this would not be now. Ripping off those bandages is the only way to be free.

6. Would I have forgiven myself if I had been there at the end?

When my stepfather first became ill, we thought we would not have long together. They told us six months. That was ten years before he died. In that time the man I knew faded. It must have been a slow process, but it did not feel like it. Every stage of his decline had a new terror, a terror he dealt with first, often with anger and repulsion at the devices he and my mother collected to assist him. He rejected the loss of his independence and dignity, even at the expense of her exhaustion and the injuries she received trying to act as his legs, his arms, his back.

I became angry too. I could not hide it when I was with him. I could not understand his bull-headed resistance. His pride. I wanted her to have a better life than this.

When he died from Covid she held his hand through a hazmat suit on an infection ward. Although I lived many hours away, I could have made it there on time. I told her I couldn't risk quarantining for three weeks when I needed to care for you. But there would have been ways; it was not a hurdle I couldn't surmount. The truth is I was afraid he would see my anger. I was ashamed I could not let go of it in his final moments. Now, I cannot think of him without reflecting on my own cowardice, although he whispers in my dreams "there is no shame here". If I had been kinder, braver would I have forgiven myself for the years of frustration? Perhaps I would not be me at all, perhaps you would not be you.

Jerome Bruner wrote: "[The trouble with analysing the Self] can be attributed to the "essentialism" that has often marked the quest for its elucidation, as if Self were a substance or essence that pre-existed our effort to describe it, as if all one had to do was to inspect it in order to discover its nature...So what emerged as an alternative to the idea of a directly observable Self was the notion of a conceptual Self, self as a concept created by reflection, a concept constructed much as we construct other concepts..."

I photograph the handkerchiefs and marvel at the flattening of the image, at their conversion from a tactile medium to something distant, a veil passed between the viewer and their messy presence. I wonder what it means to try and understand why I am me – to pin my "Self" down and contain it. To categorise the elements of it. I think of the moment when this work passes from me to another, how I will lose control of it and all that it means to me. The contemporary definition for "stultitia" is "folly"...

Perhaps I am an archaeologist, digging for meaning, pulling it out of the mud and photographing it for posterity – cleaning it up and destroying its context in the process. Perhaps I am a forensic photographer, gathering evidence and capturing it for a jury to judge its value, without contamination between the two.

I think I shall burn them, the handkerchiefs. But first I shall squash them into two-dimensions, I shall mark their boundaries, I shall put a layer between them and you, like cling-film over a raw and bloody heart ...or spleen. You do not want to touch them, and I do not want them to touch you.